

1 Kings 8:41-43

41 "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name 42 —for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, 43 then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

Romans 12:18-21

18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;[g] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Good morning, friends! It's good to be back with you today, After one Sunday away at synod assembly and then another away for our pulpit swap, it's quite good to come home again, to once again join you in worship. I'm also excited to conclude our sermon series, Exploring God's Mission, with the last focus of our mission statement: hospitality.

Each piece of the mission statement is a building block or a puzzle piece of our identity, so without one of the portions, we wouldn't be the same. We would be incomplete without worship, service, or wellness, without living God's love and sharing God's love. That's why we've spent so many weeks walking through this, to look at how God's mission actually takes life within our midst. Just as

important as the presence of these pieces, though, is the proper location of these pieces. If you put the cornerstone in the wrong place on a wall, the structural integrity of the building is compromised. And that's how humpty dumpty falls. Or, if you force a piece into the wrong part of a puzzle, not only is the picture off, but you damage both that piece and the surrounding pieces. Presence and placement are important in the development of our integrity, of the image of who we are as God's people at Christ Lutheran Church.

That's why it's so important that hospitality is here, and hospitality is last. The theme of hospitality permeates our scriptures. God creates the universe as an act of hospitality, that others might enjoy the abundant life God radiates.

Eden was a place a hospitality. Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality to three strangers who become God's presence to them. Israel's called to offer hospitality to travelers, foreigners, and slaves. Jesus is both a giver and a receiver of

hospitality throughout the Gospels, eating in the homes of others and creating safe space to those at society's margins. Hospitality is the refrain sung after every verse of scripture, that God welcomes us and calls us to be welcoming of all others.

Yet, there's also a danger of a focus on hospitality first, namely that sometimes when we say hospitality, we limit our imaginations about how God's hospitality works to this building. We can fool ourselves into believing that Christian hospitality is the same thing as Miss Manners' cleanliness and politeness and home-based entertainment. Christian hospitality cannot be contained by those rules of societal niceness. That's why we must first walk through all the other portions, living and sharing God's love, worship, service, and wellness, to understand the context of hospitality as part of God's mission here. Of course, hospitality includes hosting people within our building, like we will do this Tuesday with a

new cooking group run by New River Valley Community services for their adult clients who live with disabilities. It means having a clean facility, helping newcomers find their way during worship, actively embracing people with a handshake and a vocal, embodied welcome.

But the hospitality that Jesus models for us and that scripture reveals to us is so much more, so much more. "So far as it depends on you," Paul says, "live in peace with everyone...if your enemy is hungry, feed them. If they're thirsty, give them something to drink...overcome evil with good." Hospitality is commitment to peace, to provide for those in need, even if they're different from us. Hospitality in the Christian faith means that, when we're faced with evil, from whatever realms, whether from our neighbors or from across the world, we face that evil with good not just for our sakes, but for theirs as well.

The dictionary definition – the one that we’re not using – of hospitality is “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.” When considering Christian hospitality, we can possibly reframe that in this way: **hospitality** is the good and generous care for guests, visitors, or strangers that creates and furthers peace for all. That’s why Across the Spectrum, and Highlander Lutherans, and offering emergency assistance to those facing food or housing insecurity, are examples of hospitality. Hospitality for the people of God is care for guests, visitors, and strangers, acts which create peace for all.

You might have heard the bustle this week about the potential of settling refugees in the New River Valley. There’s plenty of people in the community that support this move, and plenty who are concerned about it. I suppose that’s the nice way of saying some people are spreading fear of

these refugees, even threatening protests, in an attempt to scare anyone interested in helping refugees away from this commitment. But we will not succumb to fear when the God of Mary's courage, of Jeremiah's courage, of Jesus' cruciform courage, is calling us to hospitality.

Let's be fundamentally clear about this: We cannot be committed to hospitality and refuse to welcome refugees. To deny assistance to those fleeing war, oppression, and persecution is to deny the very heart of scripture. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that, in allowing hospitality to strangers, we may unknowingly commune with angels in our communities. Jesus reminds us that, whatever we do for the least of these, we do for Jesus, and that the converse is true as well: whatever we refuse to do for the least of these, we refuse to do for Jesus. Scripture is clear that, when we refuse to meet the needs of those who ask, we refuse the request

of Jesus. We refuse to give the Lord who gave us life another chance at life.

That's why I, along with Michelle and others connected to CLC, have committed ourselves to help resettle a few families here to the New River Valley who are refugees from the incredible strife in their native lands. These people, who's homes have literally become unlivable, now need a new place to survive. They're asking for a new home, for a new opportunity at life. We in the church are in the business of abundant life! We're in the business of second chances, of lives transformed by grace. This is hospitality. This is saying yes to Jesus by saying yes to those in need.

Until this week, this passage from 1 Kings hadn't really hit me, but this week it hit me hard as I heard people, fellow citizens of Radford, argue that these people weren't welcome, that these people weren't worthy of our hospitality. The words of Solomon ring over and over again in my

ears: “Do everything the immigrant asks of you. Do this so that all the people of the earth may know your reputation and revere you.” In other words, through King Solomon, God makes pretty clear the expectations of the community of faith. *If you’ve got a good reputation because I’ve given you a good life, people are going to come to you, and ask for your help. Give it to them, whatever that means, and through that graciousness, people across the world will respect you.* This is what peace looks like, this is what it looks like to even assist our enemies, to overcome evil with good. If someone is in need, meet those needs. More than a guide for morality, that sounds like solid foreign policy. But that’s a concern for another day.

At this point in a sermon full of commands, the voices of Lutheran preachers fill my ears with a simple question: Where’s the Gospel? What’s the good news about this?

The Gospel, friends, is that Jesus Christ has set us free, and intends us to bear that Gospel to others. We know that we're liberated through God's forgiveness in Christ. The Gospel is that, through our hospitality, we're called to act out the Gospel that we know so intimately in our baptismal birth waters, that we taste so lavishly in the communion meal. Think about it this way. The words of the Gospel's forgiveness are active verbs. They words meant to lead to action. We're meant not just to receive the Gospel, but to perform the Gospel. Hospitality to those in need, whether college students or people with disabilities or neighbors facing food insecurity or refugees who need a new lease on life, is how we act out the Gospel to the least of these.

Hospitality doesn't just happen in this building, and it's surely not easy. This is one of those hard times where I'm standing up here as your pastor, and I'm asking you, pleading with you, calling you to trust God's promise instead

of the fears and selfishness that so often guide this world. There's always resistance to the kind of drastic hospitality called for by Jesus, but that's why I'm committing to be a part of this, why I won't ask you to do something I'm not committed to doing myself. People will fear that there's not enough – money, time, space, hours, resources – but our God, the God of abundance, calls us to a way of life that breeds more life, that gives birth to second chances, that shares our abundance rather than fears losing something that we just don't need.

Hospitality is about making peace through welcome, through grace, through overcoming evil with good. We face that fundamental choice here. Will we live the Gospel, the good news, that these people so desperately need to experience? Will we share with them our abundant life, the vibrancy of life we first received from Jesus? We will be

known throughout the world for fear, or hospitality? For hate,
or for life? Let's choose life for them, and for us. Amen.