Is hospitality just for Early Word and kids at school? Or is it for us adults too?

Is the need to be friendly and kind, seeking out others who might be lonely or struggling to connect, and initiating some kind of contact with them…

…tell me that’s just for the extroverts, right?

My most recent experience of being shown hospitality, warm and thoughtful on-going hospitality…has been from many in this church. This is a very nice and kind church, keep leaning into that.

But before coming here, one of my most recent experiences with surprising hospitality, came from the church I used to serve on staff at, Bemidji Covenant. Here’s what happened.

The Evangelical Covenant denomination, the one who holds my ordination credentials, was hosting their Annual Meeting, 3 months ago - April. The church that hosted the Annual Meeting just so happened to be the church I served on staff for 6 years.

When I arrived for the Annual Meeting, I have to be honest…I was a little anxious. I hadn’t set foot in Bemidji Covenant for about five years, was serving in the Methodist denomination as lead pastor, and didn’t know how I would be received.

Many of the staff I had served with had moved on, they had done some redesigning of the church, new staff and new lead pastor. How would my old team members in Congregational Care respond to me? I didn’t know how to feel.

The moment I stepped into the church, a woman I didn’t recognize, came bounding out of the main office area. Bounding! She was saying my name and warmly greeting me. She had a big smile and knew MY name. Okay…

How did she know my name? I didn’t know her name.

And for the next 10 or 15 minutes or so, she walked me through most of that big church. Showing me all the changes they had initiated, how they had repurposed my old office, updating me on new staff, and more plans they had to upgrade.

And as she walked me around, she also created space and celebrated as many people come up to me to say “Hi” and give me a hug. So many came up and shared how much they missed me, missed serving together.

They had even heard on Facebook of my new appointment here, in Buffalo. And they were so happy and excited for me!

It was a bit overwhelming. Such a warm and very gracious homecoming. I felt very welcomed and well-remembered and even celebrated.

Even known by people I didn’t know. It was so powerful, it still touches me.

Can you remember what good hospitality feels like? To be a little anxious about meeting NEW people, including people you know but haven’t seen for a while? And then experience such wonderful acceptance, warmth, friendliness?

Do you remember the last time you had your nervousness surprisingly and graciously washed away by friendliness, acceptance, kindness and warmth?

When was the last time you felt the impact of good hospitality? Where were you? Who made you feel welcomed and accepted and how did they do it?

I have to laugh a little at God. I’ve experienced powerful hospitality in Bemidji, in my previous two churches as we ended and wrapped things up so well.

And here…wow! And then I come to this week’s theme, an opportunity to revisit hospitality.

I can see now that God has been preparing me for this day with so much lived experience of good hospitality…for this sermon’s main theme – hospitality.

**That’s part of our response to God’s love for us…our need to be people who work hard to make other people feel welcomed, accepted, appreciated and cared about.**

**Because…please catch this WHY, BECAUSE we believe the Lord can use hospitality to open hearts to a deepening relationship with himself.**

Lydia’s story teaches us to believe that.

Did you know God thinks hospitality is a big thing? Hospitality, being kind and friendly and gracious…is close to God’s heart. It is a major theme woven all over in the Old and New Testaments.

And now we see hospitality weaving itself in and around all over Lydia’s story.

As we kind of work our way through our passage, I would like you to pay attention to three things.

First, how Paul and Silas, in following the Lord, how they extended hospitality to Lydia.

Second, how God used that hospitality to change Lydia’s life, her priorities, her direction and purpose in life.

And thirdly, how Lydia responded to the Lord in faith AND began extended hospitality to MANY others.

Notice the power of hospitality to change lives.

First, it would be so easy to miss the significance of the hospitality expressed by Paul and Silas. They headed to a place down by the river they had heard was for prayer. When they arrived, they discovered…it was mostly women.

Uh oh!

Okay, wait a minute! As Minnesotans, you know how hard it is for men to come to a table in the fellowship hall if it is full of women! Or how hard it is for a women to join a table that is full of men! Right?!

Avoid! Just avoid! Eek! Run away!

Honestly, it is hard to come into any room or any table where you are the new person. “Hey!” That is not easy!

But Paul and Silas weren’t Minnesotans. They didn’t leave. They sat down and began interacting with the women. *Didn’t they know that wasn’t culturally acceptable?* But they weren’t following culture, they were following the Lord.

So, they were hospitable. They began to talk to the women. Introducing themselves, listening, visiting, teaching, fellowshipping, enjoying each other. It’s biblical folks.

But then I want you to notice with me what the Lord did for Lydia. God uses the most unlikely people to achieve God’s purposes.

Little background on Lydia, we learn she was from Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

Nerd moment…purple dye was manufactured by the Phoenicians from a marine mollusk, **Murex trunculus**. The shell was broken, to gain access to a small gland which was removed and crushed. The milky fluid from that gland becomes red or purple once exposed to air.

Piles of these broken shells still remain on the coast at Sidon and Tyre. Long story short…time consuming, lots of manual labor, it was really expensive to deal in purple cloth.

Making Lydia a wealthy business owner. She had access to powerful wealthy people. And we learn she was a worshipper of God.

She was at the river listening intently to Paul and something amazing happened. In verse 14 in the NIV it says, **“The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”** There was more for Lydia than just believing in God.

The Lord wanted to transform her life and become part of her life. And she was open to the Lord’s influence and believed in him.

Lydia responded to the Lord with bold faith, as a hero of the faith! And in bold faith asked for her whole household to be baptized, including children. Establishing infant baptism as a revered practice in many Christian denominations.

And she was bold in converting to Christianity and following Jesus, because her life and all of her worldly wealth that could have been jeopardized by the world and persecution.

She asked to be baptized. Maybe we haven’t thought about baptism for a while. Baptism is a complete identification and connection with Jesus, welcoming into the Faith community and Forever Family of God.

Baptism is an outward expression of an inward movement of grace, forgiveness, and transformation and growth into a relationship with Jesus.

If we were baptized as babies, grace is at work. God begins working in our lives in a deeper way bringing us over our lives into deeper faith and trust. Until one day, we put our trust in the Lord personally, proving our baptism was effective.

Baptism is not a once and done. Meaning we are to continue to grow into our baptisms, over our lifetimes, going ever deeper in trust and obedience in following the Lord.

It is something we surrender to, this working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts over time. God helps us come to faith and brings us spiritually alive and then to spiritual maturity through Christ.

And our lives are continuously changed…maybe slowly over time or in big leaps, but continuous growth!

We begin to follow Jesus and want to give the Lord all of who we are. Just like Lydia did.

Notice with me what Lydia did. After she responded to Paul’s message with baptism for her and her whole household.

Then in a gush of hospitality she urged Paul and Silas to come to her home. **“If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house.”**

*Didn’t Lydia know that was against societal norms. That’s not what you did in that culture?* Oh yeah, she was following Jesus now.

Paul and Silas could see the spiritual change in Lydia. They believed she had put her faith and trust in the Lord and received her hospitality.

But our hero Lydia, didn’t stop there. Remember verse 40 that was read? After Paul and Silas left Lydia’s house they continued to talk about Jesus. And they were arrested and flogged and put in prison for a short time before being released.

Verse 40 tells us what they did next, “**After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.”**

We see that Lydia uses her hospitality to now offer support to Paul and Silas in their ongoing Jesus mission. Their mission of helping others come to know the Lord and grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Lydia’s household then grows into becoming a church in Thyatira. Her home becomes a hub where siblings in Christ find encouragement, being transformed from INDIVIDUALS following Jesus into a COMMUNITY following Jesus.

Lydia was blessed with financial and social resources and used them for the Jesus mission. She used them to establish a house church in her community. She gave all of who she was to Jesus for the expanding of his kingdom.

Truly proving herself in being our third hero in our Heroes of the Faith sermon series.

**Time of Reflection**

As we reflect on Lydia’s faith journey, what gifts are you blessed with that can be used to help build up this faith community and transform lives in the world?

How IS God calling you NOW to provide hospitality to further His kingdom?

Knowing that as each of us shows hospitality to others…in church AND in our lives, the Lord will use it to open hearts to a deepening relationship with himself.