

“Rooted in Hospitality”

NT: Luke 14:7-14, 2 Corinthians 9:8  
Galatians 6:10, 2 Timothy 3:16-17  
Hebrews 13:2, Romans 12:13  
Acts 2:46-47

**2 Corinthians 9:8... God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.**

**Galatians 6:6-10... Those who are taught the Word must share in all good things with their teacher. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.**

**2 Timothy 3:16-17... All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.**

**Hebrews 13:2... Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**

**Romans 12:13... Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.**

**1 Peter 4:9... Be hospitable to one another without complaining.**

**Acts 2:46-47... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**

There is a sign in our own home and I suspect many of you have it too or at least have seen it. It reads, “The South: The place where... 1. Tea is sweet and accents are sweeter. 2. Summer starts in April. 3. Macaroni and cheese is a vegetable. 4. Front porches are wide and words are long. 5. Pecan pie is a staple. (or is it peecan) 6. Y’all is the only proper noun. 7. Chicken is fried and biscuits come with gravy. 8. Everything is Darlin’. 9. Someone’s heart is always being blessed (Bless your heart).”

After growing up in Florida (which is a Southern state but possibly just the southernmost Northern state), moving to North Carolina, and now living in Virginia, it has been fun to experience each of these characteristics and discover just how true they are. But I think there

is something missing; at least a word commonly associated with the South, although not exclusively because I think it can be found and experienced anywhere, and that is hospitality. *Southern Living* picks up on it often and certainly did with an article entitled “6 things to describe Southern Hospitality.” The article declares that Southern Hospitality is not just sweet tea, swinging on the front porch, and Sunday dinners, but is really defined by:

Politeness- “Please” and “thank you,” “yes sir” and “yes ma’am” make up the common vernacular. “What’s the hurry” is another phrase we might voice or hear, as we enjoy talking and having the company. Both loved ones and guests are not rushed. (According to a research group called Twiddy, Virginia tops in this description of hospitality)

Good Home Cooking- There are multiple love languages wrapped up in food. Food is arguably a love language itself. In Southern Hospitality, one dish is never enough because you never know who might be coming to the door. There are no apologies for butter or sharing family recipes cooked time and time again (meatloaf, fried chicken, etc.). I think every church I have ever attended in my life has really embraced this part of hospitality.

Kindness- A characteristic of southern kindness can be summarized in one phrase: “there are no strangers, just friends we have not met yet.”

Helpfulness- Southern Hospitality quickly and readily offers directions and a helping hand, serves you drinks and plates, and doesn’t mind bringing you seconds.

Charm- Southern charm is defined as grace under pressure and making others feel welcome. Being kind, witty, and considerate to everyone we encounter at the office, grocery, or church. At departure, there will likely even be someone on the front porch hollering, “y’all come back now, you hear!”

Charity- The southern motto of charity is “do unto others without expecting reciprocation.” Acts of kindness and helpfulness and politeness are done out of respect, courtesy, and habit, in hopes you will know you are welcome to return again and again.

Over the last couple years here at First Presbyterian, hospitality has become somewhat of a buzz word amongst the Staff, Strategic Planning Team, and the Session. After adopting a 5 to 10-year Strategic Plan in January of 2019, that invites First Presbyterian to grow in congregation numbers and participation, vitality of programs and communications, and financial sustainability, it was Christian hospitality that rose to the surface as a necessary element to help guide us and deliver us. In short, if we weren’t being hospitable to those we know and love who are already here and a part of this flock, and to strangers or those we have not yet met, we are working against ourselves and actively preventing possible relationships with others and with God from forming. What resulted was a focused initiative to assess

hospitality from the perspectives of the physical plant (accessibility, directional signs, and identifiable welcome area), person (greeters, mentors, and congregational culture of serving as host and guest), and process (welcome packets, baked goods, name tags, classes, and new member celebrations). To be sure, many of the things we identified above within Southern hospitality are present and working well. Our Care and Nurture, Worship and Music, Service and Outreach, and Spiritual Growth teams work hard and are intentional about caring and loving and supporting. I truly believe there is no one they wouldn't be willing to help and be there for. Our Staff and Pastor and Associate Pastor and Director of Music search committees, as well as our FPC Weekday School also understand much of what it means to be hospitable.

I can't help but mention getting "pounded" upon arrival to Lynchburg and First Presbyterian in 2016. Cory in 2017 and Chad in 2018 got "pounded" too. If you have never heard of it, perhaps it sounds like a bad thing to get "pounded" but indeed it is not. The outpouring of love and joy and welcome is abundant in a "pounding." Just to clarify, had a pounding occurred in January of this year and our family would have received the amount of toilet paper we did in 2016, we would have been setting up a tent outside these doors to hand out rolls of TP this March and April. And we would have still had some left over I think. Not to mention all the goodies, treats for kids, and other very thoughtful gifts. These poundings were a sure sign of hospitality and welcome and generosity.

I could also mention the surprise birthday parade that just happened this Thursday. I think there may still be some remnants of silly putty. Cards of support to those in the hospitable, rides to church for those who don't drive anymore, love gift offerings for those who have specific needs, flowers at Easter and Christmas for those going through harder times just to say we are thinking of you and love you, a smile and "welcome" from a friendly face as you come to the front door, a cup of coffee and a muffin during Coffee Café or a handful of cookies and a swallow of lemonade or punch following worship, and the list could go on. We are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but in so many ways, I do believe we are a church rooted in friendly hospitality.

The challenge before us as a church is to build upon our friendly hospitality with a hospitality to all. To talk more about this, I am going to lean on Thomas G. Long, a theologian and well-respected author on Christian worship practices. In his book *Beyond Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*, Long addresses the question, "Why do people come to worship?" The answer is two-fold: 1. The need for communion with God and 2. The need for human community. Both of these answers are grounded in a desire for a sense of belonging, and hospitality plays a central role in belonging. We feel like we belong when other people know our names, shake our hands and welcome us into the circle and to the table. Hospitality is the process, or as I would call it, the outpouring of God's grace, that ushers us into a place where people know our names, shake our hands, and welcome us and we can do the same. But

hospitality is far more than a greeting at the door or taking a few moments following worship to get to know someone by name and make a connection.

In short, I believe hospitality in the church is the role of being both guest and host. We are first and foremost guests in God's house. As God's guests, we have been invited to also be the host to other guests of God's house. God is not the only one doing the hosting in the church. We, as God's children, the body of Christ, are called not to just come and be hosted, but to host. We are called to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And to serve as hosts in God's house, we must be willing to entertain the thought of greeting and welcoming someone we have never seen before and do not know. To serve as host, is to open the door of possibility that those you are greeting are not really strangers, but friends, brothers and sisters in Christ and mission partners you haven't met yet.

Long refers to this characteristic of vital and faithful worship as "Hospitality to Strangers." He offers this scenario to consider:

Imagine that you are one of the greeters at the door of the church welcoming people to worship. A couple you do not recognize- visitors, strangers- come to the door. How are you to view these people and what is your responsibility toward them? Should you imagine that the most important thing you can know about these visitors is that they bring needs for intimacy that you and the congregation are to meet? Should you assume that they have come "in the hope that someone will love them, that someone will accept them just as they are, and they value a warm, open environment? No. To do so would be to assume that these visitors are just like you, and that there are no real differences between you and them, and the highest goal possible is that you and other members of the congregation will become intimate friends with them and invite them into the private spaces of your life. The reality, however, is that these people are not exactly like you; indeed, they may not be much like you at all. They are the other, strangers, different. Because they are the other, they bring the promise of gifts and wisdom the congregation does not yet have. Because they are different, they may also bring challenges and potential dangers. They may be hard to accept, disruptive, or even violent, or they may have needs, financial or otherwise, beyond the capacities the congregation can meet. Regardless of their promise or their danger, the church is called to be hospitable to these strangers, and you are on the front line of this ministry.

Like Abraham and Sarah by the Oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15), we are commanded to show hospitality when strangers appear at the flap of our tent, to open our house and table and God's house and table to these strangers so that they will find safe lodging, nourishment, cool water for the face, the oil of blessing, and rest for the soul.

Standing at the front door of the church is far more than being a nice person issuing a cheery welcome. Standing at the front door of the church, on the front lines of interaction, is showing the hospitality of God.” (Long, pg. 33-34)

Long continues, “To greet people at the front door with generosity and welcome in the name of Christ and making room for them in God’s house, is not just friendliness- it is a saving grace. And it is a saving grace not only for them, but for us. The stranger at the door is the living symbol and memory that we are all strangers here. This is not our house, our table, our food, our lodging; this is God’s house and table and food and lodging (34)... By showing hospitality to others, we receive the very presence of God. To be sure, people need to be treated with kindness and generosity, but that is not all they need. They need to be welcomed into the house and graciously invited to the table, but that is not all they need. It is not all we need. What we need is to be welcomed into God’s house, recognized and known by name, and joined with others in offering their lives to God in acts of mission and good works (35)... People need more than friendliness. People want their lives to count for something, and they come to church to make an offering. People want to join with others in giving and serving, in doing something of value for God and for the world. Symbolically, we want to place ourselves in the offering plate (38).”

To be rooted in hospitality is to draw our example of hospitality from God. “A life of hospitality begins in worship, with the recognition of God’s grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God’s love and welcome to us.” (Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*) God has been hospitable to us by calling us by name, claiming us, making room for us at the table, and providing for us abundantly. It is our turn then to be hospitable to God by showing Christian hospitality to others, our friends and those that have yet to become our friends.

Let all God’s people say... Amen.