

RADICAL HOSPITALITY
GOD'S RADICAL HOSPITALITY FOR US
1 JOHN 4: 7-12

Put yourself in this scene. You're walking by the front desk at an extended stay hotel. Out of nowhere, a dog bounds up to the hotel's front desk, wagging his tail. You watch the desk agent lean over and toss a rolled newspaper into the dog's mouth. The dog then walks away down the hall and the desk agent goes back to work processing paperwork for the next guest in front of him.

What was going on? Turns out, the dog's owner had just sold her house after 40 years and—like many guests at an extended stay hotel—is in a sort of limbo before moving into her first home alone. So staff at the hotel were trying to help her maintain her routine.

The dog jogs on over from her hotel room to the front desk, gets the newspaper just like he did when he lived in the house and takes it to her every morning.

Hotels in general have a unique perspective when it comes to hospitality – I guess that's why we call it the hospitality industry. When guests walk through their doors (humans or animals), they're expecting not just good service or a meal, but a temporary home. The level of trust implied by a guest's choice to spend one or several nights in a hotel over another isn't insignificant.

Ice storms are rare in Texas, and often shut down entire cities. So when a hotel guest who'd recently had knee surgery said that he needed to get an important meeting at

a corporate office a block away – with crutches on an icy sidewalk – Gus, the bellhop, sprang into action.

"I remember it just like it happened yesterday. It was very slippery out there, and the gentleman kept saying, 'I don't know what to do. I don't know how I'm going to get there.' So I found these two rugs, and took them to the front door of the hotel. I laid one rug over the ice and said, 'Walk on this rug.' He took a few steps onto the rug. Then I took the one behind him and placed it in front of him, and he would take a few more steps forward; when he'd get to that one, I'd pull the other one. And I just did this over and over again until he got to the office. It took us about 30 minutes to go one block, but he was in awe and kept saying, 'I can't believe it.' But it's the only way I thought I could get him there, so that's what we did."

Gus explains, "I treat every guest the same: this is my house. When you come to my house, I want you to feel welcome."

The hospitality industry knows that true hospitality means much more than just delivering guest service with warmth and a smile. It often means going to extraordinary lengths to create a sense of belonging.

Not everyone who stays in a hotel is on vacation. The realities of a customer's life can be weighing heavily on their hearts and —hospitality—can make a huge difference in a person's life.

I don't know what sort of images the word "hospitality" conjures up for you, but I expect that for most, it's images of dinner parties or maybe weekends away at a friend's house. Maybe the first thing that comes to mind is a smile, a handshake, a hug or a greeting.

Maybe some of you even think ... hospitality ... "that's not for me!" You wouldn't be the first.

There's a common misconception that practicing hospitality, means we need to be gifted in entertaining. "As soon as I get the house finished, the living room decorated, my house cleaning done — then I will start inviting people." Even the dictionary defines hospitality as the friendly and generous reception and *entertainment* of guests, visitors, or strangers. That's the world's view. Entertaining puts things before people.

Hospitality puts people first. "No furniture — we'll eat on the floor! The decorating may never get done — you come anyway. The house is a mess — but come home — stay with us."

Hospitality puts people first.

As with all good things, hospitality finds its origin in the character of God. Hospitality is God's heart. In fact, when we think about it, God invented hospitality, and models it for us. God was the world's first host to humankind in the garden.

In the Old and New Testaments, Biblical hospitality is certainly more than knowing how to cook a gourmet meal, how to set the table nicely for guests, and how to keep a

friendly, comfortable atmosphere going with pleasant and polite conversation. Nomads and sojourners had no Motel 6 to stop into, no convenient McDonalds at every exit. Little travel was possible without the assumption and expectation of hospitality. Remember when Jesus sent out the 12 two by two? He told them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money, only the sandals on their feet and two tunics.

Travelers would stop at a stranger's home seeking food and shelter for the night. Homeowners would host and feed strangers who appeared at their doors.

If word got around the trade and travel routes that a home was stingy and inhospitable to strangers, their honor was in danger if they might need to hit the road. But, if a homeowner was known to be gracious and respectful, that, too, would become known and all the greater would be their honor, their security and their resources in their times of need.

That made hospitality in the ancient biblical world a way of life, even a way of being. They didn't have to have their house in order. They didn't have to cook the perfect meal. If they had a house, if they had a bed, and somebody needed it, then it was given.

But, God's hospitality is more than entertaining, even more than providing food and shelter for a night or two. Divine hospitality comes directly from God's heart.

All human hospitality begins with God's divine hospitality. We can only pass on what love and welcome we've allowed God to show us. "We love because God first loved us."

We love because God first loved us. Not because of anything we've done but because God offered us hospitality when we were still strangers to His love. God's hospitality and love is offered to us even when we're at our most unlovable, even when we have nothing to bring but our broken hearts and our messed up lives.

When we accept the love of our God – so deep, so wide, so huge; when we accept the love of God which shows mercy no matter what; when we accept the love of God who sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him ... when we accept that love... then we open the doors of our hearts to God's transforming work in our lives.

God's love for us is the source from which all *real* love flows to others. God's divine hospitality for us is the source from which all *real* hospitality flows to others.

When we open the doors of our hearts, then the living God will make His home there. Think about that ... God's home, God's address is your heart!

Now, think about what that means as we offer God's divine love and hospitality to others. If God makes his home in our heart, there is really only one response we can make: To show love to one another. And this is precisely what John recommends in today's Scripture: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another"

If we treat our hearts as God's address, then the doors of our hearts should be flung wide open to love others as God loves us; to offer divine hospitality to others as God first

offered hospitality to us. Loving others and offering Divine hospitality gives the world tangible evidence that God lives in hearts, and that God loves them and desires to make his home in their hearts as well.

The heart of hospitality is to show God's love to the world. The supernatural, unselfish, generous, sacrificial love and care to people who desperately need to know that there is Someone who cares, Someone who can help, Someone who loves, Someone to save them.

Christ's redeeming work on the cross is God's greatest act of hospitality ever offered. Divine hospitality is radical; extreme, often costly. It isn't always easy or "nice" or pleasant and entertaining.

But, we all need it. And after we've received it, we need to lavish it on others.

Let us pray:

God of Divine Hospitality, may our hearts be completely filled with your love. We need more and more of you so that we can offer more and more of your love and radical hospitality to the world. Amen.