

TRANSCENDENT HOSPITALITY

Hebrews 13:1-3; 15-16

April 27, 2025

Let's travel together for a few moments, even if only in our minds. It is 4 AM on a chilly, late March morning, and you—alongside 17 of your travel companions and friends—make it to the Indianapolis airport. You're heading toward Malawi. We check all the bags, recheck all the passports, go through security, and finally make it on the plane. Then reality sets in; this is only the first leg of our almost 30 hours of travel time, a true tale of planes, trains, and automobiles. Nevertheless, we carry on through more flights and layovers, customs and immigration checkpoints, a few mad dashes, and even more long lines until at last, the wheels hit the ground in Malawi. We have landed in the Warm Heart of Africa.

And I think we can all be real here. Our clothes are dirty, none of us smell the best, and we are certainly running on fumes, longing for the nearest shower and bed to make us feel fully human again. But before that even happens, we are met with the welcome of a lifetime. Twenty or thirty people, many of whom are complete and utter strangers, have made their way to the airport to greet our team with song and dance. Hugs are shared. Smiles are passed around. Connections are instantaneously made. Memories have been cemented in our minds of new faces who would become family in a few short days. You cannot forget a welcome like this.

And now this—sparing no minor detail—is in fact what 18 of us from Second and Witherspoon Presbyterian Church encountered upon landing in Blantyre, Malawi, during our most recent mission trip. We were spending time in relationship and worship with the congregations of Michiru and St. Peter's. We witnessed a welcome no words could have prepared us for—a showing of ultimate hospitality that I promise none of us will ever forget.

It quickly became clear that this moment was not unrelated to the divine, but in fact infused with it. That day we

encountered total strangers, who showed up for *us*—in all of our traveling glory—with hearts shaped by the One who calls us to welcome the stranger with love, by the One who blesses us with unity in Christ. These strangers, who now make up our Malawian family, embodied a transcendent hospitality in their welcome and way of life that revealed God's love without reserve. These angels on earth helped us to more fully recognize that while we may have gathered around tables in southern Malawi or we gather around tables here, we are all guests at the ultimate table in Christ's glory, with Christ as our host. Now this, friends, is certainly a welcome we must not forget. A welcome to the table that we are all called to share.

And so, I wonder when you were last welcomed, not only with open hearts but open minds. Even more so, when was the last time *you* were able to extend this kind of hospitality to a friend, let alone a stranger? Hospitality, as we know it, is a virtue made even more popular by media. A simple web search will guide you toward books, podcasts, videos, Pinterest pages filled with ways to host: tips for cooking the perfect pot roast, trendy ways to decorate your table, and creative gifts to leave with your guests.

Now, there is no harm in getting creative with how we can improve our hosting. It is important to realize that this is a different kind of hospitality that our God is calling us to. Hospitality is much more than how we prepare our homes, our churches, our communities to host. The hospitality media—and in particular our culture—feeds to us is a welcome that finds its center in excess and entertainment rather than community and connection. The hospitality we are used to extending today also doesn't include the stranger most times, but instead is used as a way to strengthen the bonds of relationships we already have. But our God calls us to practice a

different, a broader, kind of hospitality, one that involves the stranger always. *Philoxenia*.

The Greek word *philoxenia* is the word used for hospitality in Hebrews 13. This word can be broken into two parts. The prefix *philo* means “to love,” and the suffix *xenia* is the word for stranger. Together, the word can literally be translated as *lover of strangers*. And so, practicing hospitality in the biblical sense is more than hosting a meal for those we already know, but is about opening up our hearts, our minds, and our spaces to encounter strangers as we come to know and love them as God knows and loves them.

At its core, this kind of hospitality—intentional and open—is about showing love through recognition. It is about recognizing the shining face of God in the faces of our neighbors before we know them. It’s about taking the time to listen to and hear the stories of strangers whose lives are different than our own. To hear the ways that we are more alike than we may care to admit. This kind of hospitality has more to do with being present together in God’s presence than it does anything else. And it is doing this—practicing this kind of transcendent hospitality—that is just what God ordains.

Psalm 133 tells us this. It tells us that we must view our dwelling together in unity as a precious gift given to us by God. And even more so, this precious gift is not a gift alone, but a way of being that God ordained. David, the writer of this psalm, uses the imagery of precious oil poured out by God on the head of Aaron to describe this gift. This oil isn’t used sparingly but has been poured out so abundantly that it runs down Aaron’s head, through his beard, and upon the collar of his robe. But David doesn’t end there. He goes on to continue describing this blessing to be like the dew that rests on the dry, arid mountains of Hermon and Zion. This gift refreshes.

Our unity is a refreshing, precious gift poured out by God on us all, a gift we must not waste but are commanded to take to heart. And, friends, this commandment lived on in the life of Jesus. God’s abundant love was poured out on us, took on flesh, and walked among us to give us new life. Jesus’ words teach us a lot about the power of transcendent hospitality. Countless times, Jesus advocated for the poor,

welcomed the stranger, fed the outcast, dined with sinners, and showed ultimate hospitality by dying on the cross for us.

Jesus himself faced an inhospitable humankind. And yet, in the face of division, persecution, and opposition, our Savior promoted unity for one another. Promoted love *no matter what*. God’s ultimate sacrifice of His only Son established a new covenant, creating for us a family, a family to be rooted in love for one another.

And friends, as Easter people, the rest has been left up to us. We must hold fast to this ordained calling on each of our lives. This covenant comes with a call for unity that cannot be ignored, especially not right now. As our world, our systems, and our contexts try to feed us with isolation and division, we must reach for the call to seek the blessedness of unity, for this requires our attention. We must take it together.

We must put in the work to model our lives in the way of Jesus. To allow for our kindness, our welcome and generosity, to become a living sacrifice—pleasing to God and healing for this world. This sacrifice will look different for each of us, but I do know it requires every one of us to do our part.

I know our team of 18 from Indianapolis encountered many angels doing their part on our journey in Malawi. These angels taught us more about the power of hospitality than we could ever fully describe. You just have to get us to tell you about it! But the most profound experience of welcome and belonging we were shown was during our two-night homestays. Our friends from the congregations of Michiru and St. Peter’s were eager, so eager, to welcome us into their homes. For a year they have been waiting on hands and feet to welcome us with Christ’s love, to show us their home—the Warm Heart. And so, ten families agreed to host us, going above and beyond to ensure we were never hungry and always comfortable. Together we shared our stories of our lives. We embarked on new adventures like trying raw sugar cane and making the staple food Nsima. Some of us were even blessed to be taken to the mountaintop to pray. But above it all, we had the chance to get to *know* each other more deeply and therefore love one another more clearly as the children of God scattered around the world,

as angels sent to journey together. And, beloved, journey together we did, and oh what a mark of blessing it left with each of us.

So, my question to you is: how will you answer the call to journey through life together? What will you do to do your part? Friends, the opportunities are endless to showcase transcendent hospitality rooted in sharing Christ's gift of love with the world. So, take the time to volunteer at the Northside Food Pantry, getting to know our immediate neighbors in need and sharing the joy of a smile and conversation. Reach out to that friend down the block that you haven't spoken to in a while. Introduce yourself to your pew neighbor that perhaps you've sat by for a while but don't quite know yet. Take a walk and smile at those you pass by... even when it feels awkward.

Big or small, we all must answer the call and recognize that each of us are guests at Christ's long and glorious table. And you never know, when you show hospitality to a stranger—when you welcome them to Christ's table—you may be entertaining an angel and not even know it. And these angels—strangers—have so much to teach us.

And so, let us live into our call to welcome the stranger with love from God, committing to doing good, and sharing what we have with all of God's beloved children. May we find the time to be present with one another in the presence of God more often. Because this is what God has ordained. For this is pleasing to God and healing for this broken world. Amen.