

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Ten Years On

Preface:

So we're continuing on in our survey of the values we hold as Smoky Row Brethren Church. Last week we talked about Kingdom-building Stewardship, about the way we consider the the things we have--time, treasure, and talents--as gifts from God to be used for building God's Kingdom, not our own kingdoms. We talked about how our call isn't to maintenance--because if all a congregation does is maintain itself, it will die. And maybe should. But instead our call is to promotion; we're not ultimately called to chaplaincy, but to mission. Before that we talked about our Core Value of Prophetic Multiculturalism. And today we'll be talking about "Intentional Christian Hospitality:" what the phrase even means, how it relates to what we do as a church, and why we cannot let this one go, cannot ignore this area of our Smoky Row life.

Before we start, though...let's pray.

Prayer:

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Framing

So let's walk through this Core Value together. We'll go back and forth between our description of "Intentional Christian Hospitality" and the things we've got to notice within it.

It starts this way:

Intentional Christian Hospitality: "A"

A. Smoky Row is a community of Christians marked by their commitment to active Christian

hospitality. We consider hospitality to be that virtue that begins in an openness to those who are unlike us and ends in strangers becoming family. At its best, hospitality implies a commitment to the total well-being—spiritual, financial, emotional, and physical—of whomever God brings into our lives. Sharing the same root as the word “hospital,” hospitality seeks to transform an individual’s life in such a way that he or she is more fully alive after experiencing hospitality than before it. As we act with hospitality, we offer our time, treasure, and talents—our whole selves—to others in an attempt to meet their needs. When we ourselves are offered hospitality, we receive it gladly, humbly, and thankfully, knowing that it is God meeting our needs through the agency of another.

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Noticing “A”

First of all, we have defined ***Hospitality*** in a very particular way, here, right? Hospitality is behaviors on behalf of another person that are transformational for that person. Actions on behalf of another person that care for, as we put it “the total well-being” of the person--spiritual, financial, emotional, and physical.

Hospitality isn’t just a virtue; it’s action. It’s acting for another person in an attempt to meet their needs.

Usually when we think of hospitality we think of offering someone a drink if they swing by our house. But that is not what we mean by this word at Smoky Row. This is really

important: We mean more by "Hospitality" than most people mean.

And we acknowledge that we are offered hospitality from one another. We help one another meet the needs we have, right? That is part of what it means to be the Church together. And explicitly, here, we confess that when people offer hospitality to us, offer to meet the needs of our lives, we strive to receive that service "humbly, thankfully, knowing that it is God meeting our needs through" one another. Has COVID made this all much more difficult? Yep. Does that mean we've abandoned this? Nope.

This Core Value of ours reminds us that in so many ways the church is a hospital; a place people enter so that they can be healed in whatever ways they need healed. And so we give and receive healing hospitality to one another, even when it's difficult to do, like now.

So this first portion of our Core Value raises questions for us as individuals. Do we think of Hospitality as just a character quality people have? This person is hospitable, that person's a slug.

Or do we think of Hospitality as action, as behaviors we do for others? We should also wonder just how willing we are to allow our needs to be met: because, honestly, if we can't accept help the help we give is likely to be just a little-bit tainted by our own self-sufficiency. How has COVID affected our ability to ask for help, I wonder?

And this first portion of our Core Value raises questions for us as a congregation: Are we structured to easily meet the

needs of one another? Easily offer this “Hospitality” to people both inside and outside our church? What do we need to better take care of the physical needs of people, or the spiritual needs of people, or the emotional needs of people, or the financial needs of people?

But before we move forward, let me point out again: Our understanding of what Hospitality is has way more meaning than what we usually think when we hear the word.

Let’s keep going!

Intentional Christian Hospitality: “B”

B. We consider our efforts at practicing hospitality to be explicitly Christian. We offer our lives to one another not simply because it’s a nice idea, but because it’s exactly what God has done for us. Our Christian hospitality is modeled after the same selfless, loving concern Jesus showed for all humanity, which has changed our lives (Phil 2:3ff; Rom 5:8). Also, our efforts at hospitality are formed by scripture, which not only calls us to certain “hospitable” practices (Hebrews 13:2), but also reminds us that our willingness to offer aid and comfort to one another is both a test and a marker of the transformation we have undergone (James 2:14-17; 1 John 4:20-21).

Other Christian beliefs direct us to act with hospitality. We believe that God has invited us into the intimacy that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share (John 14:18-20); has adopted us as children (Rom 8:12-17); and has given us all the rights and responsibilities that come with being part of God’s

people (1 Peter 2:9-10). Further, one primary way to understand God's work through Jesus is declared by Paul when he states that "God was, in the Messiah, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). This work of reconciliation is an ultimate act of hospitality, in which God invites us back into a relationship that sin and evil had broken.

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Noticing "B"

So what do we notice here?

First of all, our Hospitality is ***Christian Hospitality***, right?

We all know people who are actively hospitable, who act to meet needs of others in their groups or outside their groups, and who would also never set foot in a church except for a wedding or a funeral--and would be uncomfortable, really, even then. Our neighbors, our family members. We know these people.

We're not hospitable because we think it is a nice thing that people should do for other people. We don't act to meet others needs because it's just what you do in a church. We have foundational, theological reasons for acting with hospitality. It comes entirely from our desire to be like Christ. Jesus is the face of hospitality. He acted with all of his energy to meet all our needs--and hasn't stopped acting, still acts and will act in the future to take care of our physical, emotional, spiritual--every need we have.

Because of Jesus we know what it means to give of

ourselves, to think about the needs of others, to invite people into our lives, and offer them ourselves and our resources. Jesus is the source of our hospitality.

At Smoky Row, we are actively hospitable because in so many ways it really kind of is a sort of summary of the Christian Life, of what it means to “become like Jesus.” Where the needs of others, and our efforts to meet those needs, intersect, there is Christ.

So we don’t open up our wallets and our checkbooks and our calendars because it’s a nice thing to do; we do it because we’re Christians, and that, simply, is what Christians do. Christians make the effort.

So: Questions.

When was the last time we framed the work of Christ, our Lord and Savior, as hospitality work? Can we recognize that to mimic Christ, to become like Jesus, demands that we mimic his hospitable nature, and all the activity that comes out of it for us.

Do we, when we pull a chair out for someone, or take a person a meal, or open up spaces we have to share, or give a few dollars to someone who needs it do it because Jesus did it, because it is in the best sense the “right” thing for us to do? Or do we do it for some lesser reason--a reason that ultimately, I promise, will not stand up against the world's call for us to look out for number one?

As a church, when we talk to each other about what it means to be a Christian, does this ever come up? Does the

story we tell of what God has done include how hospitable God has been to us? Our God is the God of Hospitality.

But there's still more to read!

Intentional Christian Hospitality: "C"

C. These statements highlight a basic quality of Christian Hospitality: it is *intentional*. We don't simply wait for our hospitality to be called upon, but seek to be proactive in providing hospitality to those who need it, regardless of whether they are part of SRBC. We position ourselves to be able to provide compassionate aid to anyone who might ask, whether they need a meal, a place to stay, or something else. We try to develop safe, trusting relationships with others, so that both parties feel the freedom to ask for one another's hospitality. While we never coerce anyone to accept hospitality, we do offer it, and we follow through when the offer is accepted.

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Noticing "C"

This section is key; this section is important. Our Christian Hospitality is Intentional, not accidental.

It is easy to live accidentally or coincidentally in this world. To be like Jesus when something comes up, you know? To find ourselves in this place or that place and just happen to have the opportunity to act like Jesus. This is easy: To just go with the flow, and if life brings us some moment where we can actively be hospitable, we'll take that opportunity most of the time--I mean, our hearts aren't small or tough, right? We're not made of stone!

But waiting for some moment to act with the sort of hospitality we've been talking about takes more than making the most of the situations we find ourselves in. It takes more than making the most of what life brings us.

God didn't trip into saving humanity through Jesus; the opportunity didn't just reveal itself and he happened to take it. God worked with wisdom and grace and patience through generations of people so that at the perfect time, Jesus could come into the world to save it, right?

We do the same things, here. We don't depend on accidents & coincidences in order to act hospitably; we position ourselves to make it happen. As a church, we do this structurally: by empowering gifted leaders and setting up ministry structures to enable hospitality to happen. COVID's dealt those a blow, a bit, but we're picking them up, too. We try as a congregation to develop relationships with other institutions and organizations and people so that hospitality can happen. Who we say yes to and no to when it comes to our building, what groups we have pursued—it's driven by our sense of Intentional Christian Hospitality.

We work for it. We are intentional about making hospitality happen. And this part of the core value, more than the others, might stretch us individually. Because it makes sense to structure a church to make sure hospitality like we long for happens: It makes sense to have a benevolence team and a prayer email right? But are we individually intentional? Do we position ourselves, structure our own lives, so that we can meet needs before they come across our laps? This is a big question: Is our personal Christian Hospitality accidental? Coincidental? Or is intentional, and

so much more effective because of that?

And here's a small tip: The easiest way to begin to be intentional about providing Christian Hospitality for others, is to ask ourselves questions about whether or not we are intentional about providing Christian Hospitality to others.

Let's keep reading.

Intentional Christian Hospitality: "D"

D. Smoky Row provides structures in which intentional Christian hospitality can be practiced, such as small groups, prayer gatherings, and fellowship meals. In many ways, however, this offering of our lives to one another, and receiving each other with grace and commitment, is a characteristic of all we do at Smoky Row. It is ultimately the practice of "loving your neighbor as yourself," (Mark 12:29-31) and "doing to others as you would be done to" (Matt 7:12), no matter the situation. At base, our hospitality is both intentional and Christian because it reflects to the world the intentional, hospitable love that God has for everyone. This love was ultimately revealed through Jesus and is still being revealed to the world through the church and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Noticing "D"

Straightforward, right?

The source of our core value is the love of God. It's the love of God.

All we're doing when we act with Christian Hospitality is acting out the love we've received. And so of course, we do what we can to structure ourselves so that we can mimic the intentional, hospitable love of God that we talked about just a moment ago.

What's missing in this for us, as a congregation, right now? What do you think?

And finally:

Intentional Christian Hospitality: "E"

E. As we pursue the God who is love, and work to become like Jesus, who "loved us and gave himself for us," (Eph 5:2) the practice of intentional Christian hospitality naturally flows out of us. This becomes our greatest witness to those who are not yet followers of Jesus (John 13:34-35), and one of our greatest sources of strength as we together pursue "the upward call of God" in our individual lives (Phil 3:14).

Intentional Christian Hospitality: Noticing "E"

Finally, lastly; this Intentional Christian Hospitality? For us, it's natural. It's natural. It is normal for us, having experienced what we've experienced, to think about the hospitality we can offer others.

For Christians, for we who have the Holy Spirit, this is a natural thing. We have been changed by love, and as we are ever more changed by the Love of God, we naturally pay more attention to the world around us, naturally want to do

more for those we see, naturally position ourselves to be people who meet their needs. Because we know that our needs have been met in Christ.

And we know that we are here to meet one another's needs. We belong to a hospitable community; a gathering of people who will care for us if we are willing to be cared for.

And that certainty becomes a source of strength for us, and also, a witness to those around us of the love that has changed our lives.

If, in fact, it's not natural for us to show love as we have been shown love, it's a great big blinding alarm light that we ought to pay attention to. When someone who loves us tells us, lovingly, that we don't seem to be showing much love, it's a gift for us, because it's an opportunity to become like we're meant to be.

Conclusion:

Intentional Christian Hospitality is, I really think, in some ways our greatest strength and potential strength as a church. People stay in a church because it is a caring place. Inspiring vision, immersive mission: these things help us stay connected, without them we aren't much of a congregation. But people come into the body of Christ because they realize that it is safe there, that their needs can be met there, and that finally, they can experience love there.

How can we better live out Intentional Christian Hospitality?

How can our church act with hospitality toward those outside us, and toward one another? In what ways are we succeeding? In what ways are we failing? And how about you: Do you act with hospitality? I don't think any of us can wriggle out of the call of this Core Value: if we are not hospitable, then there are parts of our hearts that Christ has not yet touched.

How can we remember that we do this because of Christ? Our Hospitality is Christian before it is anything else. And all the things we do as we seek the "total well-being" of one another and others we do because Christ first sought and still seeks our total well-being. How can we remember that our starting place is not guilt, or compulsion, but the love and grace we've experienced in the Lord and, prayerfully, his body?

How can our church be more intentional about revealing and providing Christ's love to others and to one another? How can we communicate to people that the hospitality we provide, we provide because of Jesus. He is why we do the things we do. How can we better structure ourselves so that the physical, financial, spiritual, and emotional needs of each other and those whom we meet go unmet less and less and less often.

We can't forget about Intentional Christian Hospitality and what it means for us to live up to this core value of ours. Our Hospitality is Christian, and our Christian Hospitality is Intentional. And if we let go of this core value, we lose more than we could imagine.

We lose the chance to be a hospital, caring in the Lord's

name, with all our efforts, for the total well-being of the patients the Lord brings to us--both one another, and those outside us.

And that's simply something we cannot lose. If we lose it we lose more than we can bear.