



June 5, 2023

It's Not Just About the S'mores and Bacon

It's that time again! Memorial Day marked the beginning of the next round of visitors to our homes and community. I find myself making lists in my head for things I am sure to need: s'mores fixings, pancake batter, eggs, and bacon. Where are the spare beach towels and sand toys? Do we still have that croquet set? Are there clean sheets on the beds? Are there some church bulletins and Christian books strategically placed as conversation starters?

Yes, it is the season of the great migration north for our children and grandchildren, old friends, missionaries on furlough, seasonal workers, and many, many strangers. It calls for thoughtful and ready hospitality both in our own life, and in the life of St. Andrews. In other words, true hospitality is both an individual and a corporate practice. In my past life at Calvin University, I researched the unique roles of the Christian practice of hospitality in teaching: how to make the classroom a place of welcome, safety, nurturing, dwelling together, challenge, and, by semester's end, sending as described by Amy Oden, in her book *And You Welcomed Me* (Abingdon Press, 2001). It is most important to note that when we host people these actions are all *intentional*, and that they go far beyond providing a bed, or a meal.

1. **Welcome**...most of us do this well, I think. We have a lifetime of practice opening our arms and homes with grace and sacrifice in ways that honor and serve our guests. A true welcome is inviting, beckoning others into the intimacy, shelter, safety, and comfort of our own lives no matter who they are. It is generous and kind even if we anticipate visits from people who may prove difficult. Sometimes there is an adult child or grandchild who has wandered far from God, or the weight of an impaired

relationship with its burdensome baggage of unforgiven and unspoken hurts. It takes lots of prayer leading up to those visits, doesn't it?

2. Restoration...we automatically make our guests feel at home with good food, a hot shower, and the chance to rest and recreate. It's what we do best. But the nourishment of restoration goes far beyond food and a bed. It includes prayer, and the deeper sustenance of the Gospel. Hospitality should have the goal of casting Christ's net wide. And when we have a visitor with a hard heart, this is a particular balancing act because we ache for the restoration of people alienated from God and from us. We long to be reconciled and open with those we love even though our relationship may be tenuous. I think it is very important to *never, ever, ever miss a chance* for the Gospel to plant its seeds. It takes respectful and gentle intention, and attentive modeling.

3. Dwelling...here is where our short time together is often superficial and accommodating. We chat about weather and work while tiptoeing around deeper issues. When we dwell together well, there should be a *sense of abiding*-in love and acceptance, of the willingness to listen deeply, and of giving wise counsel. Sometimes it also requires a forthrightness from which we too often shy away. Oden notes that dwelling without challenge is too shallow. People should not only leave our company feeling rested and well-fed, but loved and challenged to address life issues that need attention. Don't be surprised when *you* are the one feeling challenged to change.

4. Sending...do not neglect the significance of sending a guest away strengthened, hope-filled, armored for a life against sin and corruption, and, perhaps, forgiven and reconciled to a new life in Christ. Have extra Bibles to send with people. Ask to pray together with them as they prepare to leave. Send them home with food- a loaf of bread perhaps, but, more important, the food of God's love.

Lastly, our hospitality actively looks for people who are starving for far more than food. In your everyday life, be on the lookout for people hungry for companionship, hope, help, dignity, safety, shelter, and the love of Christ. Invite them to church. For a cup of coffee. To a Bible study. No matter your age, your open arms are needed in this hurting world-*arms that are willing* to welcome, to serve, to embrace, to pray, and to send people made in God's image out filled with love, acceptance, purpose, challenge, and hope.

Happy hosting!

~Written by Julie Walton





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