



Be Our Guest

1 – Be Our Guest

Pastor Ted Cunningham

This is not really a series we're doing; it's actually one message that got away from me. Does anybody know what I'm talking about? We had to divide into two and when you see it, I know what's in the hearts of a lot of people right now, so we're going to get it out of the way. Wasn't planning on doing this, but in the first service, I heard people humming, so I'll get us started and you finish it. "Be our guest, be our guest..." That's good. It's all out of our system.

We are talking not just about serving; we're talking about Christian hospitality. I read a book this week called *Unreasonable Hospitality* by the owner of one of the top restaurants in the world. He says, "Serving is bringing the right food to the right person at the right time. That's serving. Hospitality is how they feel during that process."

I love what Dan Cathy, when he took Chick-fil-A over, the Lord's chicken, from his father Truett Cathy, after Truett passed away. I thought this was so perfect. Dan said, "We get our word *restaurant* from the French word that means to restore. When you go to a good meal with family and friends, you should be restored 70% in your heart and 30% in your stomach. Unless you are a teenager – then that is flipped" He said, "We want people leaving chick-fil-A restored." I love hearing that because that's our desire here at Woodland Hills Family Church – for every guest that walks on this campus, week in and week out, but then also when people interact with us throughout the week, they know they matter to God and they matter to us. That's the feeling they get and that goes beyond serving and into hospitality. You know we're at a time right now where customer service has been struggling a little bit.

Since the pandemic, a lot of people are short staffed. I've been loving the signs that I've been seeing. The signs are getting creative. What these restaurants are now doing is putting up signs to tell all of us how to treat their staff. Why? Because we're failing; we're not doing a good job. I don't know if you've seen the signs over the years, but they are getting a little more aggressive. This is one. I asked Stephanie and Savohna to take a picture. *This is our McDonalds here in town. "Let's be kind to each other. We treat our team members like family; we encourage you to do the same."*

Then they get better. I love what Dunkin put up. *"We are short staffed today. Please be patient. If you run out of patience, ask for an application."* Some of you are looking for a job? We've got them. They're everywhere.

This one I think will work. This isn't a sign from Branson, but I'm looking forward to the first restaurant that displays this sign. They're going for anybody. *"Now hiring guitar player. Must have cooking, bartending, and serving skills." We'll take anybody that's breathing. We just gotta get people in here."*

We've seen this a lot. This has been a struggle over the last few years. With TikTok and all that and all the hostility people are getting the gotcha moments in restaurants and all that of people not behaving well.

I saw this online interaction and I was like, *ouch, I should probably share it with the congregation.* This guy said, "I once went to lunch with a pastor to think about joining his church. His treatment of the waitress was all I needed to see. No chance. I don't know if people realize how much weight many of us place on this indicator." A lady responded to that with, "I waited tables for just shy of 22 years in four different states. Everyone hated waiting on the church crowd." I look around the room at the waiters... I don't even have to ask you to raise your hand if you are a waiter or waitress because they are the ones nodding their heads right now. Is that true of us? Oh, I hate that.

A guy then said, "One time I asked our local baristas who their worst customer was. They all named the same person – "The local pastor"" This isn't a Branson post. This is from somewhere in the country. "And when I asked, 'Why was this person the worst?' they simply said, "Entitled."" As we talk about Christian hospitality, this week and next, as we prepare for the summer, as we welcome people to our church... There are a couple of criticisms, and I don't know, they may be cliché but there are a few criticisms we need to wrestle with, and I think Christian hospitality has a good answer to both and the first one is Christians are hypocrites. "They say one thing and they do another." "They preach one thing and they live another." Here's their orthodoxy, what they believe, and here is their orthopraxy, how they live it out.

What we are talking about the next couple of weeks fixes all that because hospitality walks the walk with strangers and guests. It says this is what we say we believe, and I want you to see we are going to practice it.

Here's another criticism that the church can receive. "Christians are clicky." "I got there and I didn't fit in. Actually, when I showed up, it was pretty obvious they didn't want me there." We want every person that walks on this campus, week in and week out, to go, when they get here, "They want me here." When they leave, "I matter to God and I matter to them."

We're dealing with this loneliness epidemic in our country. You've heard it – it's all over the news. Hospitality is a much-needed solution to that. Inviting someone that maybe is different than you, someone that's challenging, someone that we love to use the term around here as EGR – extra grace required. You have neighbors like this. You have coworkers like this. You meet strangers like this. And you know... It takes 30 seconds to figure out this is a polarizing person. We want to talk about how you and I live out the very heart of God when it comes to caring for those that are not like us. Showing Christian hospitality to those that are not like us.

We are going to look at four observations today from the scripture about hospitality as we grow in our understanding of this, but more importantly, that we put into practice. We want to practice this in our church and in our homes and in our lives.

1. Hospitality welcomes the marginalized. God's heart is for the marginalized in our community and it should be our heart as well. Jesus says this in Luke 14: 12-14 – **12 Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid."** Now, a lot of times, when we think hospitality, we think about having a nice meal, being restored, being healed with family and friends. Christian hospitality goes deeper. Christian hospitality goes farther with this idea of welcoming and caring for the generous reception of people who don't look like us, don't talk like us... Let's add it in, Woodland Hills family church, they don't vote like us, that we welcome them. Jesus says this – **13 "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind..."** When you think about hospitality and caring for others and hosting a meal, think about those who never get invited to a meal.

This is the heart of God. I was reading this week in Leviticus, and I love this text because it shows God's heart for his people. He commands his people in Leviticus, When you go to pick grapes, don't pick them all. Leave some on the vine. When grapes fall to the ground, don't touch those. Let those stay." Why? "Those are for the poor and the foreigner traveling through your land. Those are for people who are going to need those on their journey." I want you to know this is God's heart and this is why Jesus is saying open up your arms for those who are not getting the invitation to other places. May that always be true of our church. He says if you do this, **14 "and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you..."** They are not going to pick up the check at the next meal. You pick up the check. But look at this. Jesus says, **"...you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."**

I turned the notes in for the message on Friday morning. I've told you for years that the Lord has to be done speaking around noon on Friday because Katie needs to get it all loaded in. I turned the notes in and 20 maybe 30 minutes after that Pastor Timothy Keller went to be with the Lord. He has been one who has had a great impact in my life in ministry. I quote him often from here and I know Timothy Keller will be quoted until the Lord returns. I just remembered this quote from him. I didn't plan to share, but it's on this idea of the marginalized and out Luke, he says this, **"Biblical hospitality goes far deeper than merely entertaining your friends and family at you home."** The heart of Jesus is what he's talking about here. **"In the Bible, hospitality is proactively seeking to welcome the marginalized."**

So, we welcome the marginalized, we want them to come, we want to invite them, we want to welcome them. But look at what he says here. "Proactively seeking..." Having eyes that see those that are not getting the invitation. Let that always be the heart of this church – inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind."

Max Lucado has this great line. He says, "Long before the church had pulpits and baptistries, she had kitchens and dinner tables."

I know some of you are dealing with neighbors maybe and I hope my neighbors are not here to hear this, but... and I think it's precious. We have a neighbor who has a dog that's too big for her. When the

dog gets worked up and out of control... we'll be walking our dog... You know how dogs are with each other. Listen, we don't have perfect dogs. Our dogs can get out of control, but her dog goes absolutely crazy and her response when her dog gets out of control is to just let go of the leash. because it's going to knock her over. So, we have to pick up our dogs like we're making a sacrifice unto the Lord and have to hold the dogs up so they don't get attacked. I'm just saying a lot of times, when we think about our neighbors and we think about the challenges and the difficulties, we're like, *You know what? I need to build a taller fence.* There is nothing wrong with fences. Fences are boundaries; we all need our space, and we need to let neighbors know, "Hey, I don't want to be with you every minute of every day. I get boundaries, but when it comes to the church and it comes to the follower of Jesus, I love what one pastor said some time ago. He said, "Maybe it's time we start building longer tables rather than taller fences." May the table at Woodland Hills continue to grow and grow large. I know what we're talking about is challenging and we are going to get to it in a second. What do you do when it's challenging and what do you do when it's difficult and awkward?

Max Lucado says, *"Something holy happens around a table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see backs of heads. Around the table, you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium, one person speaks. Around the table, everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk."*

We want to invite all of you to consider your role? Not just here on campus, although that's part of it. But as a follower of Jesus Christ, how are you doing with opening your doors? Growing your table to those who can never repay you. Some of you are like, "I don't have a home. I live in an apartment; I don't have a place to entertain. A lot of times we can start coming up with all the excuses why we do not have to offer generous hospitality.

That's why I felt this week to show you my grandma's house in Naperville, Illinois. She's the house on the left. It's a simply home. I always loved to tell people she paid her mortgage off like 50 years before she sold it. A simple home. One of my favorite stories of my grandma is she always parked up here by the garage and went in the side door. She got out one day and noticed that the door jamb was broken, and someone had broken in the back door. She called the police and brought them over. My grandma was very hospitable. The police are having coffee, doing their report. They get to the part in the report where they're like, "Mary Jane, what was stolen?" My grandma looks around and she's like, "They stole nothing." Why? My grandma had nothing worth stealing. I always picture two criminals standing in her kitchen. "I told you we picked the wrong house!" "Why didn't we go next door?"

My grandma was so embarrassed. There was nothing of value worth taking and yet I can tell you on this block, this was the most hospitable woman on Jackson street in Naperville, Illinois. You'll notice the front porch where she spent most of her time flagging down neighbors. This guy doesn't have a front porch because he's on the back porch smoking a cigarette, trying to figure out how he's going to make the mortgage payment.

I don't care if you live in the house on the right, the house on the left, or you have no house. Christian hospitality is for you. The generous reception of strangers, the generous reception of foreigners, the generous reception of the marginalized, that's on you and that is on me.

Every time I see this Proverb, I think of my grandma. Proverbs 15: 17 – ***Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fatten calf with hatred.***

We are not talking about extravagant and expensive. We're talking about what do people feel when they are with you? When you are serving people, what are they feeling?

2. Hospitality opens the door to every nation, tribe and tongue. If a church is doing Christian hospitality well, it should be a diverse church. For years now, Something I've been praying for, as a pastor, is "Lord, make this not just a multi-generational church, but a multi-cultural church. What can we do to open our doors wider to every nation, tribe, and tongue?"

Max Lucado speaks so well of hospitality, and I love his words. He says, "*It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word. They both lead to the same result – "healing."* We want people leaving here each week restored and healed. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message – "You matter to God, and you matter to me." You may think you're saying, "Come over for a visit," but what your guest hears is "I am worth the effort. I am worth your time."

Consider the genius of God's plan. The first generation of Christian was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least 15 different nationalities heard Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to gentiles. Women worshiped with men. Slaves and master alike sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other? The answer is yes. We wonder the same thing today. Can Hispanics live in peace with Anglos? Can a Christian family carry on a civil friendship with Muslim couple down the street? Can divergent people get along? The answer is yes. The early church did. Without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages. The cross of Jesus Christ. And through the simplest of tools – the home."

I love in Acts 2: 46 we read that all of these nationalities, all of these different people, gathering, forming the very first church, what we would call the first century church, the Bible says, ***They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,***...

That's why it's a criticism of our church I'll never fully understand – "They have too much fun there together." I just don't know what the opposite is. "They really don't like each other. Would you like to go with me this Sunday?" "They don't really get along. There's a lot of division and anger toward one another and they don't enjoy one another. I'd love for you to be a guest with me this week."

That you and I would leave here... I have some Christian brothers and sisters in this church right now that are in this service that I just think about the times that I leave their presence where I feel restored and healed. The heart of this message and next week is that every one of you would experience that and every single one of you would be giving that, would be offering that to those who step on this campus, in your home, at your table, at a restaurant. That we would be a church with glad and sincere hearts.

3. hospitality does not play favorites. We're talking about the marginalized, we're talking about every nation, tribe, and tongue. And in James, we now get into the socioeconomic side of this a little bit more. It says in James 2: 1 - ***My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?***

And the answer is yes. I know some of you are in Christian ministry and you run even non-profits in our town, and you do donor development and you have donor meals and all that. I get that you do all that. We don't do that at the church. I don't know how much people give because I'm not going to show favoritism. There have been times people have said, "I need you to meet so and so because so and so has this and you're going to want to know this..." I'm like, "We actually have a verse for that." And the verse tells me not to do it. The verse tells me, "Don't escort the guy who just sold his business down to the front while you're neglecting the poor in the back." Let's all have eyes for this. Find the one impoverished that walked in here this week and next week and go engage. Go invite to lunch. Find someone who will never be able to repay you and show them hospitality. The church will never be one to show favoritism and to play favorites.

This is a little wordy, but stick with me. I didn't have time to edit. We don't treat those that think they are a big deal like big deals because we believe every person that walks on this campus is a big deal, no matter their background, no matter their bank account. That is key for us.

Years ago, when our kids were small, Amy and I went to a restaurant in Springfield. The restaurant no longer exists. I could have told you the night we went there it wasn't going to last long. I feel like a food critic sometimes and I think I should be a food blogger because I love food. Some of you are like, "Really?" I enjoy food. And I could just tell... It's how people feel. You've been to the restaurant. I don't care if we're talking... I mean Cracker Barrel has some incredible servers. There's fine dining with good servers. You've been there where you walk out and you're like I think I just made a friend. I don't know for sure, but I think the waitress is coming to thanksgiving. That's how that just happened." You've experienced that. I've experienced that.

We went to this restaurant, and it was packed. It was a newer restaurant, and they just weren't ready. Our kids were small, and we were in a booth. We ordered our food. Thirty minutes goes by and there's no food. Carson ends up falling asleep in the booth. I asked the waitress to get his food to go. An hour goes by and we don't have our food. I go, "Can we actually all get our food to go? We live in Branson, and we have to get home." Still no food. We ended up getting the food and the check about an hour and a half after ordering.

Did I wither away? Yes. I barely made it out of the restaurant standing. No, I was fine. But you know what made it painful? In the middle of the restaurant... I don't know who said this was a good idea, but they had a VIP table. At the VIP table it must have been big shots from Springfield and all that, but as we were sitting there waiting for food, nobody was getting food in the restaurant because they were doting on the VIP table. I wish I could have videoed this. We weren't doing gotcha moments in restaurants yet. TikTok hadn't even happened yet at this point.

But the whole staff would come out with these VIP courses every five to seven minutes to the VIP table and it would go by and we would all be looking on. Then they'd lay it down and you could just see it around the restaurant. That's what made it worse. As we left, I go, "Amy, they won't last long if there are a few people that are VIPs and the rest are nobody. I think the same is true of the church. If a church becomes a click and there are a few key people that are cool and in the... I just love there are some people right now that I know you have church hurt because right now, I'm watching people who are really nodding their heads. Let there never be a VIP table at Woodland Hills Family Church. Why? Because every single one of you in here, you matter to God, and you matter to us... period.

There are some of you who want to give examples of how you didn't feel special when you walked into Woodland Hills Family Church or how someone didn't say hi to you at just the right time in just the right moments. Or you sat down and no one came over and engaged you. When we talk hospitality and everybody in here... Raise your hand if you're in hospitality in Branson, Missouri. Okay, you're going to be able to say amen to this. Hospitality can be awkward, messy, and exhausting. Says, the Treasure Lake section right down here. I do comedy every summer at Treasure Lake. I just love doing Treasure Lake at an RV park. You've got all these RV owners. They get hospitality down here. They understand it and you get the frustration and the exhaustion and the trying to meet the needs of people. I say this so we all understand. We're never going to be perfect at this but know it's our heart and we're going after it every week.

Scripture says in 1 Peter 4: **8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.** Do you know why? When you offer hospitality to one another, there are going to be people that get entitled, who come to expect it and when they don't get it... You know what grumbling is. It's complaining under your breath. And boy do we have the perfect example of this at Woodland Hills Family Church.

For years, this was as coffee cup size at Woodland Hills Family Church. I want to remind everybody that this was our coffee cup size for the *free* coffee you receive on Sunday morning. Then 2020 hits. Sonny does a phenomenal job running all of our hospitality ministries. Let's hear it for Sonny. She does a phenomenal job. Let's hear it for our hospitality team. This was our cup forever and then we were at staff meeting one day and Sonny goes, "Hey, we're having supply chain issues." I laughed..., but it was true. She couldn't get that cup anymore. So, we switched to a little smaller size. And we heard about it. You entitled, ungrateful, church members. Now, some of you were joking and we appreciate that. The first week, we had the smaller cup, a guy grabs it and was like, "What kind of rip-off church is this." We know you were joking, but some of you were serious. I go, "Sonny, I'm sorry you had to put up with that. What's your solution?" She goes, "I got a new cup size for the complainers (tiny cup). You know Starbucks has a Tall, Grande, Vente and a Trinsa. We now have a new size called the Grumbler. Let's hear it for the Grumbler. If anybody grumbles, you're getting the Grumbler.

There is one thing we need as we show hospitality to one another and that is gratefulness. When you get your coffee next week... They are going to be overwhelmed. I hope somebody is not here today that's serving in coffee next week. They'll be like, "What happened, why are these people... What's in the Coffee?" It's just hospitality because it goes both ways. You just walk up, and you grab your cup and you say "thank you." and if you want to add "for my free coffee..." Just honoring people.

Childrens ministry – On September 7, my friend Johnny W is going to be back doing date night comedy. I love Johnny. He and his wife have been married for over 20 years. They don't have kids, but they serve in their church nursery. You see he's done comedy off of this, but it's sincere. It's not just a joke. He truly is passionate about serving in the church nursery. And he's taken ownership of it. He tells people... He's very serious about it. He almost militant in the nursery about "you drop off your child, you get a receipt and you don't get your child back without a receipt." He tells them, "If you don't bring me a receipt, the best I can do is give your store credit. I can give you a child of equal or lessor value, but other than that, I can't do anything." And you know what? You're like, "It's just a cup of coffee." Serving is pouring the coffee and handing it through the window. Hospitality is how I made you feel when I did that. Dropping your child off with someone and then receiving your child for the morning at Critter Street or Wild Woods, that is serving, but how you felt in the process, that's hospitality.

Johnny said they were getting the nursery painted and the children's wing painted. Everybody was putting verses on the wall. This is how much ownership takes. He was like I want to pick the verse for the nursery. You don't let a comedian pick verses for the nursery. In the children's wing, they put train up a child in the way he shall go... That's perfect. But Johnny said to his pastor, "I want to put in the nursery 1 Corinthians 15:51 – "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed."

How about home groups. Cathy Jensen – I hope some of you connect. We need leaders for home groups. Here's what happens in home groups all the time. I want to be gentle with this. This comes from the heart of a pastor who loves you, but when home groups get awkward, messy, and exhausting, people bail. We need less bailing and more engaging.

I was thinking about it this week. I was thinking about some of the people who serve so faithfully in our church that I just wonder if they were to quit their ministry every time it was awkward, messy, and exhausting, we would have nobody serving at Woodland Hills Family Church. I wouldn't be here. If every time it got awkward, uncomfortable, messy... When you get into those moments, say what Pastor Mark Patterson says, "Awkward is awesome." Next time you have an extra grace required person in your group or out to a meal, just be saying in your head... Amy and I, anytime we are at dinner or lunch with someone, we're hitting each other under the table. And in rhythm, going "Everything thing is awesome." Awkward is awesome. We don't bail, we lean in. We want you to be a leader. Engage, show Christian hospitality even when it is awkward and messy. Serve, offer it without grumbling.

4. It's good to tell people they matter to God. I know a lot of churches are doing that today, but we want to be a church that shows it. when you leave here today, how many of you are going out to eat after this service? What an opportunity. Off to the races we go. Don't just say you matter to God. I was with a gentleman yesterday on the radio 106.3. Kevin was talking about how he used to serve. He said, "Let me just tell you. Those little tracks that look like a \$100 bill that people like to give. I've never met a server that likes them. It's kind of like bait and switch. "Oh, you thought you were getting \$100.00. psych! You're getting something even better." Let's not do the bait and switch with the gospel. Let's treat people well as we share the gospel. Let our orthodoxy, what we believe, match our orthopraxy. Don't just tell them they matter to God and God has a plan for their life, show them by the way you treat them. That's why every week when you walk on this campus hopefully excellence in our environment, what you see, all the people... I hope you see... People have been here all week, picking weeds and painting. We had an accident with the golf cart last night.

Somebody was here late fixing a door, and just all sorts of stuff went into the environment for today. The experience, Katie and the team and so many have been laboring over it because we want that for our guests when they walk on campus to go, "They want me here." When you leave today, we want you to know you matter to God and you matter to us. How do you do this? Some of you are going to get into a restaurant and you're like, "This is what the waiter/waitress' job is." "They are here to serve me." What if we all leave here today and engage with people in the hospitality industry with this attitude right here – There you are, not here I am. It's as simple as making eye contact. I've tried to teach this to my kids forever. When the server shows up to the table, put the phone down, put the menu down, and all of us lock eyes with the server. Ask questions. Not being annoying or obnoxious, but just have an "Oh, there you are." And then it's as simple as yes, I'm leaving a tip. I'm not going to be that church crowd that so many servers can't stand. I'm going to be one that says, "thank you," and tips, and receives the hospitality.

And next week, when we gather, we are going to focus on the guest. We are going to talk to the guest. Right now, we've been talking to our church family about what hospitality is, what it looks like, the heart of God behind it. But as I was preparing this week, an old Baptist hymn popped into my head. I love when a Baptist hymn pops into my head and I don't have to look up the lyrics. Can you believe that. Forty years later, I still have these hymns, word for word, and there are some Baptists in here right now going, "Oh, this can't be a better way to end a message than what you are about to do right now. I don't even know what it is, but I am ready for it."

*"Come and dine," the Master calleth, "Come and dine";
You may feast at Jesus' table all the time;
He Who fed the multitude, turned the water into wine,
To the hungry calleth now, "Come and dine."*

That is the invitation that will always be at this church. To those of you who have never placed faith in Jesus, today is Come and Dine. You are welcome here.

With the message of the cross and the tool of the table and at our church on Sunday, coffee. We're getting ready to jump into summer and you know summer around here means bomb pops and all the different treats. You've seen that meme that says, "You haven't lived a childhood until you eat sherbet out of a toilet paper roll." I hope to have those as well. We want to offer those to our guests.

Father, we are grateful for a church that can leave with glad and sincere hearts because of you, because of our walk with you, and because of our desire to not just teach people about you, but to show people the way to you that they would see it in our actions and in our behavior. May restaurants have a completely different tone and feel today as we step out of this place.

I pray for every server that's in here right now, every restaurant owner, everyone in the hospitality industry who is exhausted, and summer hasn't even started yet. That they would walk out, that they would do their job as unto the Lord. Do their work as unto the Lord. That they would offer this as a discipline, as a practice of their faith.

Thank you for all you continue to do here.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, that today would be the day of their salvation and we pray this in the name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen.