

“Hospitality: The Power of Freedom & Friendship”

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First Baptist Church of Birmingham

Acts 11:19-30

CHILDREN’S TIME

Do you know what hospitality means?

One of the things it means is “Welcome.”

I have this floor mat just inside the front door of our house. When people come into our house they can wipe their shoes on it. It’s also a way to let people know that we like having them in our home and they are welcome there.

Another way some people say welcome is to place a pineapple or a picture of a pineapple by the front door of their house. That seems strange doesn’t it?

Well, there’s a story about the pineapple. In 1493, as Christopher Columbus was traveling around to discover new places, he and his men landed on the island now known as Guadeloupe.

There were no welcome mats, and it wouldn’t have done any good if

there were, because they didn’t speak the same language and wouldn’t be able to read any signs with words. Instead, the explorers knew they were welcome in a place when they found a pineapple by the entrance. It was their symbol for welcome or hospitality. This idea of a being welcomed with a pineapple spread and people began placing something in the shape of a pineapple at the entrance to their homes to show hospitality, like the picture.

Christopher Columbus brought the fruit back from his voyage and shared it with lots of people who had never seen one before. It was named the "pineapple" by the English because it looked like a pine cone and its juicy center reminded them of an apple.

The Bible says many times that God wants us to welcome people and offer them hospitality, to let them know they are welcome.

So, when friends come over to play, we can share our toys. When we see a new kid coming to church, we can talk with them and show them where to find the activity bags by the door. We want everyone to feel welcome in our home and our church. That’s one way we can show them that Jesus welcomes them into His family.

SERMON

“I wanted to create a sculpture almost anyone, regardless of their background, could look at and instantly recognize that it is about the idea of struggling to break free. This sculpture is about the struggle for achievement of freedom through the creative process.”

- Zenos Frudakis, sculptor from Indiana, creator of “Freedom Sculpture” — on the cover of the bulletin.

God prompts us to be creatively working to find freedom from what binds us.

Sometimes it is pain that holds us captive. So, I want to highlight for you a place where I saw God creatively work this week around our theme of hospitality.

I visited Virginia Brisendine the other day. She has had a rough time recently, especially after falling a week ago Friday and fracturing a vertebrae in her back. She was in and out of the ER and hospital, and now recovering at home, and in some pain. We have mentioned her a number of times during our prayer time this year because she has been in the hospital several times since January. This would be tough on most people, and it hasn't

been easy for Virginia who is now 103 years old. She has struggled.

But there are moments of light and love along the journey, where God breaks in to provide encouragement and a moment of peace that can lift the spirit. Perhaps you can relate having been through a rough time in your life too.

When I visited Virginia, she shared with me about the day when she was released from the hospital after her fall. She was, of course, in a wheel chair and needed to be wheeled out of the building. She said there was this very large man who came to take her down the hall to the exit.

This young man was only 19 years old, and approached Virginia with such gentleness, interest in her as a human being, and I would say “genuine love” that it moved her. Before he dropped her off to go back to his other responsibilities, he took a picture of her so that he could remember her. Moments like that can make all the difference in the world.

Life can sometimes be hard. We all go through difficult periods of time that can last a day, a week, a month, or a longer season. But

God provides a moment that can lift our spirits and give us hope of freedom beyond our pain.

God gave Virginia a very real connection with another human being who, in a very hospitable way, shared friendship and his humanity with her. That 19-year-old man may not have known it, but he created and invited Virginia into a wonderful space of hospitality, where she could simply be herself, a fellow human being on life's journey — and in that moment she was a human being touched by God's love.

You also can create that space of hospitality for others. Virginia's story reminds me that hospitality doesn't need to be done only in a church building, or a home. For Virginia, the space of hospitality was created in a hospital hallway. Who knows where God might be calling you to be hospitable.

READ ACTS 11:19-30

For just a few minutes, I want to share with you how this story speaks to me about what God was doing in the early church and perhaps we can think together about how God is working in our lives here in Birmingham.

Here we again find that the followers of Jesus had experienced trauma. Their close friend Stephen had been killed and as a result many of them scattered north and west out from Jerusalem, which had been the hub of their faith.

As the people moved they took the message of their faith with them and shared with the new people they met. As they shared, people responded and became believers in Jesus as well.

It says that there were some who dared enough to share the message outside the circle of Jews — a very risky thing indeed! The kicker on this was that those who were not Jews actually responded with faith!

Word about this traveled back to Jerusalem. I can imagine them scratching their heads. Even though Jesus told them that the message was for all people, they had not expected this. They now had to figure out what to do with this new thing that God was doing.

They selected Barnabas to go to Antioch to see about this thing that was happening where non-Jews were responding with faith in Jesus. I can imagine they selected Barnabas because he was the one

who recognized God's call on Saul to take the message of Jesus to Gentiles, and that was precisely what was happening.

So, Barnabas headed out to Antioch and found the grace of God having been poured out on a diverse group of people, not just Jews. He was overjoyed about this and celebrated with them and encouraged them to remain faithful.

Then, he started thinking about what might be next for them. I'm sure he noticed that these Gentiles needed additional instruction in order to mature as people of faith. And he remembered Saul, or Paul as he was to be known, who was only a short journey away in Tarsus. So, he went to get Paul and bring him back to Antioch.

Think about this for a moment. The reason that the message of Jesus had spread to Antioch was because Paul had given orders to persecute the followers of Jesus. As a result Stephen was killed and in fear people left and are now in Antioch.

The same man who caused them to run away in fear was now going to join them in Antioch at Barnabas' invitation. This had all of the makings of a full-fledged disaster.

But the Holy Spirit was clearly at the center of this. Barnabas was wise, seeing how God's Spirit was working and knew that Paul was the right person for the job.

The story tell us that Paul stayed there with Barnabas teaching these Gentile believers for a whole year. They invested their time growing friendships with the people to help them understand the work of God in their lives and in their community.

Antioch became a hub for Paul in his future missionary journeys probably due to the friendships he made there. It became like his family.

It was here in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, which means followers of the Christ. "Christ" was not a name given to Jesus by Mary, but a title that meant he was the Messiah King who was to free the people and give them hope.

These people in Antioch had identified Jesus as their new king and are desiring to live as followers of ways of his kingdom.

So, what are the ways of this new kingdom?

The last little section of the story gives us a hint. It tells about a famine that was coming. People would be starving and struggling. What would the Christian response be? They pooled their resources and sent relief for those in need who were most hit by the famine.

In this story, there are many messages for us. What do you hear?