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FBC | WJ  
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**Godly Hospitality**  
**Hebrews 13:1-2; Luke 24:28-35**

We live in a culture of mistrust. While there are still some who naively trust people, believing that most people are good and mean no harm, most of have trust issues. We lock our doors on our cars and homes, most of which also have security systems. Our schools have Student Resource Officers (S.O.R.), which is a nice way of saying, school security guard. Even in churches, it is not uncommon to find security cameras and systems, or to learn of churches with security guards. Why? We don't trust strangers. Honestly, most of us don't trust many of the people we know. And while some of the measures we take are just smart and practical, and some of what we do actually has to do with accountability, we still need to confess our individual and collective lack of trust in other people.

We haven't been the only culture to have trust issues. The first Christians didn't trust strangers. These churches (literally "gatherings") met in houses, partly because they couldn't afford to build a facility of their own. But mainly, they met in houses because it was the safest option they had. Christians, or "followers of the Way" were a part of a movement that was new in the ancient world, seen initially as a sect of Judaism, and even a cult. It was a following not big enough to be a religion, and their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, led a life that was suspect according to religious, political, and cultural norms of the time. And the first Christians (those like Christ) were accused of being even more suspect than their leader and Lord. They met privately in homes, many times at night or early in the morning. They ate a meal in which they claimed to eat flesh and drink blood. And they refused to worship the accepted gods of their communities, claiming allegiance to Jesus. This led to persecution of many Christians across the Roman Empire, mainly in their own communities where their neighbors printed flyers or petitions naming them in those who gathered in these private meetings, which were illegal at the time. Many times it led to court, and sometimes death. So, the earliest Christians were naturally suspect of

strangers who wanted to join their group. They never knew who was genuine or who was trying to infiltrate them and take them to court.

The author of Hebrews knew this. He reminds the church or churches to which he was writing that they must not lose sight of the spirit of hospitality that God showed in Jesus and to which Jesus calls his disciples to be witnesses. He tells them that they are doing a great job at loving one another, literally *philadelphia* (“brotherly love”). He told them to keep up the good work. “However,” he said, “don’t forget to love and show hospitality to the stranger.” The author reminded them of the witness told in Scripture, where some have entertained the messengers of God, sometimes even entertained God. Abraham welcomed and served God under the shade of an oak tree. Zechariah was surprised by the messenger Gabriel in the temple. Mary welcomed and conversed with the heavenly messenger Gabriel about her role in the coming of God to earth as a child. Then, two disciples invited a stranger to eat and stay with them, and during the meal the stranger revealed himself as the resurrected Jesus (Luke 24).

Since the beginning, Christians have struggled to show hospitality to strangers. Today, the struggle continues. The temptation is to gather and become comfortable in our holy huddles where our preferences our met and our comforts are maintained. Our skepticism of outsiders or strangers has its roots in fear. We are afraid of danger. With news of shootings in churches, albeit rare, our fear antennas rise up and our desire for security grows stronger. We are also afraid of change. One of my professors, Larry McSwain, said to our Doctor of Ministry class this past summer that the number one thing that creates change in congregation is new people. We are afraid of strangers, because we know that new people bring new ideas, new ways, and change. But there is another story of the church that provides an alternative to fear. It is the witness of those like Abraham who welcomed the strangers at Mamre, who turned out to be God and God’s messengers, who delivered the message that the promise of God would be fulfilled in the child to whom Sarah would give birth at the ripe age of 100. There is Mary, who welcomed the strange messenger of God, Gabriel, and accepted his message and the role of the very mother of the Christ Child. There are the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who welcomed a stranger to eat with them and stay with them, and encountered the risen Jesus. It is from this nature of hospitality and love to strangers that initiated the

development of some of the earliest hospitals, from the word “hospitality,” in the ancient Roman Empire. The earliest hospitals in the Roman Empire were built by the physician Saint Sampson in Constantinople and by Basil, bishop of Caesarea in modern-day Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

***Judy Morris Story: “Hello, Goodbye Window”.***

This past week, my great grandmother died. The story Judy has shared with us this morning reminded me of my Ninnie and Papa’s house, and the hospitality shown by them. They had a “hello, goodbye window.” They showed *Philadelphia*, “brotherly/sisterly love,” “mutual love,” love between those who are familiar with one another; but they also showed love to the strangers that have joined our family over the years. God commands us to show both love to those familiar to us as well as to see Christ in the stranger and love them. An early church document called the Didache illustrates,

“If a destitute man or woman, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is not place...make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground, that you man not show favoritism among human beings, but that your ministry may be pleasing before God.”

This is what one will find at the Hospitality House, and it is why we have partnered with the Hospitality House in Boone, which serves the stranger, the homeless, the imprisoned, the least of these in Ashe and our surrounding counties. Today, we are going to give you an opportunity to join in this ministry by signing up to bring some of the items the Hospitality House needs to carry out its ministry. In Ashe County, 80% of those who are homeless are women and children. As you reflect on this opportunity, remember that you are not only serving our fellow human beings, but you are showing hospitality to Jesus himself, who said, “whatever you do to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do to me.”

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<sup>1</sup> “History of Hospitals,” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_hospitals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_hospitals) (accessed March 12, 2015).