

Core Strength Sermon Series
Welcome – Romans 12:9-21
October 19, 2025
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I will admit right away that the scripture passage I just read only has one sentence that applies to our sermon today, but for me, this is one of the most powerful descriptions of what it means to live a Christ-like life. It's full of what the kids call "bangers," which means something really solid. Like when Jesus said in the book of 1 Presbyterians, "Wow, that 'Amazing Grace' song is a real banger." So many good words of wisdom here: Hate what is evil. Rejoice in hope. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Overcome evil with good. Right now, can we all commit to practicing one of those things this week? I have my issues with Paul, who wrote Romans, but he knocked it out of the park here.

What's the sentence that actually has something to do with the sermon today? "Pursue hospitality to strangers." Such an interesting verb choice, right? Other translations say "practice hospitality" or "open your home to strangers." And then there's the Message, which says, "Be inventive in hospitality." I like that. I don't know what it means, but I like that.

Maybe this is what it means. I've told you before about a visit I made to a local fast-food establishment which has exceptionally good chicken nuggets. I got my order and sat down, then remembered I forgot the dipping sauce. Some of you would say I should just skip the dipping sauce. What do you think I am, a caveman? Ridiculous! So, I went back up the counter and asked for sauce. The worker said, "How many would you like?" and I said, "Can I have two?" He reached down below the counter and said, "How about three?" and handed me three sauces. Now, that extra sauce probably cost that restaurant about 0.00001 cents. But the hospitality it communicated to me was invaluable.

Are we a three-sauce church? In other words, do we go out of our way to make people feel welcome, feel valued, feel seen? In this sermon series, we're looking at our newly articulated core values to better understand who we are and who God is calling us to be. Today, our value is "Welcoming."

Not long after I first got here, I had a couple friends in the community visit Crestwood and then fill out a "secret shopper" report on their experience. And there were a number of criticisms they offered about their Sunday with us, including the lack of greeting and hospitality they felt. When I shared this with the congregation, there was a lot of pearl-clutching. "Us? Not welcoming?" Yep. We've worked really hard to improve that. I'm going to tell you right now I'm going to do the "secret shopper" thing again before too long. Maybe today...Hmm! Will our guests feel welcome?

You're here, so unless this is your first visit, you must have felt some level of welcome when you first came to Crestwood, enough that you came back a second time. Think back to that first visit, if you can remember that far. What made you feel welcome? Or, better yet, who made you feel welcome? I know a lot of folks who've been here a while would say George Buchanan, a passionate ambassador for Christ and Crestwood, who made it his mission to greet guests each Sunday. Why did you come back? What made you feel welcome?

Being a welcoming church is about so much more than a smiling face at the door and a handshake greeting, although those are important. We guys have this thing we do when we see someone we know but don't want to go all huggy-kissy with a greeting. We have the head nod. We kinda tilt our heads upward and half smile, as if to say, "I see you there, but I'm only going

to minimally acknowledge you so as not to break this cool-guy façade I have going on.” Too many churches only give head nods to people. But people are looking for more than just head nods, aren’t they? They want to feel welcome.

To truly welcome means to offer hospitality to someone. Hospitality includes speaking to them, sitting with them, setting aside a few moments after worship to answer their questions, even inviting them to lunch if you’ve seen them a few times. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said, “Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place.”

Hospitality has deep biblical roots. Our first scripture passage today gives us a good example. Three visitors show up at Abraham’s tent flap, so he and Sarah bend over backwards to provide them with a gracious welcome. Abraham isn’t just doing this to be nice; the extension of hospitality was woven into the moral fabric of his society. There were no Holiday Inns or fast-food restaurants handing out extra sauces; travelers had to rely on the kindness of those along their way, and people were expected to take care of each other, even strangers who showed up at your door. In Jesus’ time, the importance of hospitality was still in place. He lived this sort of all-inclusive welcome and expected others to do the same. In Luke’s gospel, he chastises a prominent Pharisee for not showing Jesus the proper hospitality when he arrives for a meal. And the author of Hebrews draws on the Genesis story when he says, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Be inventive in hospitality.

For us as Disciples, our understanding of welcome is tied explicitly to the table. One of the reasons our founding fathers left their churches and started a new movement was that they believed there shouldn’t be any human-made obstacles placed in front of the table. If you were a believer, you were welcome, regardless of any other criteria that could be used to keep you away. We welcome all – not some, not the righteous, not those who meet our standards. As our denominational identity statement asserts, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.

To genuinely welcome someone into our midst is to offer them a place to find refuge and rest, but it can also be a place of healing. There are a lot of people out there who don’t come to church because they’ve been told by the church they are not welcomed. I know several people who had a bad experience at church and have vowed never to go back. They were told that if they didn’t dress a certain way or act a certain way or believe a certain way, then they weren’t welcome. And one of those people may build up the courage to give God one more try and come to Crestwood on Sunday. Will they be welcomed here? It is no accident that the words “hospitality” and “hospital” come from the same Latin word, because they both lead to the same results, which is healing.

But we are only getting half the picture if we believe that we are the only ones with something to offer when we welcome others. When we join together at the table, making room for the guests among us, we not only offer them a blessing, but we open ourselves to be blessed by them. The next person who visits us may be a messenger from God, sent here to have a tremendous impact on Crestwood, and we are called to make sure they know they are welcome here. Yes, our church has something to offer guests, but I believe guests have something to offer us, as well.

The early church was a test of hospitality. Fifteen different nationalities heard Peter’s first sermon on Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshipped with women. Slaves and masters shared space as equals. Today’s world has similar divisions with similar questions. Can

white people live in peace with Hispanics and Asians and African Americans? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can Christians carry on friendships with Muslims? Can people who are divided socially and culturally still be brothers and sisters in faith? Based on what's going on in our culture, no way. But the church is not bound by the culture. We answer a higher call each week when we welcome everyone into our house.

Henri Nouwen said that we are a world of strangers, separated by geographical distance and ideological chasms and fear-based suspicions. Just let that sink in. We are a world of strangers. And yet, the Bible says that strangers – those estranged from us – should be exactly who we are welcoming into our midst, because no matter the differences we perceive on the outside, they carry within them the image of God. By welcoming them, we may be entertaining angels in our midst. Be inventive in hospitality. What more could we do to welcome people to Crestwood? What's that third sauce we're missing? That's not a rhetorical question. I want to hear from you.

I know the first thing we can do is revive our Greeter Ministry, so that the moment someone walks through our doors, they have someone smiling at them and welcoming them here. Do you know that surveys show a person makes the decision to visit a church a second time within the first 20 seconds of their first visit. That means doesn't matter how good the sermon is, how good the music is, how powerful the service is. If they don't feel welcome right away, they won't come back. Will you help them feel welcome? Will you be a Greeter? Let me know.

We say one of our core values is that we are welcoming. I know a lot of people who agree with that. I know some who don't. This is both who we are and who we're called to be. Every Sunday, I want to encourage you to offer that third sauce to someone, to reach out, even beyond your comfort zone, to welcome someone you don't know. They may have been members for 10 years...that's OK! Just say, "Hi, I don't know if we've met, I'm Kory. I'm glad you're here." Because each Sunday when we come into this space, when we center ourselves in God's presence, when we take the gifts from this table, Jesus says to us, "I'm glad you're here." That welcome is not ours to guard; it is ours to share. We welcome all as Christ welcomed us.