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Pastor Ellis White
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Your Welcome: Your Guests

*Leviticus 19:33-34; Isaiah 58:7; 1 Timothy 3:2;
Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:13*

Welcome to Chapel Hill. My name is Ellis, I'm one of the pastors here. And if you are new or a guest today, I am so glad you decided to join us. I know it can be a little scary coming to a church, so thank you for taking that courageous step. You join us at a great time, because we are doing a little bit of family business over the next few weeks. And you have the opportunity to peek inside the curtain and see what that looks like.

Last week Pastor Mark began a new series entitled "Your Welcome." It's a very punny title. If you are a guest of ours, you are welcome here. But ultimately this series is more directed towards those who might call Chapel Hill their church. Over the next few weeks we are going to be asking ourselves the question: "What does our welcome look like?" Your preaching team are going to be asking you, "How is your welcome?"

Last week Pastor Mark challenged 1000 of us to act as Gorilla Greeters. And honestly, with Halloween, all I could think of when he asked us to do that was this: Of course, Pastor Mark isn't asking us to dress up as a Gorilla, although, Mike/John, if either of you would ever want to do that and play drums, I'd be down with it. No, Pastor Mark meant Guerrilla Greeters, like guerrilla warfare. Sneaky. Undercover. Get it?

Sadly our welcome isn't always the best here. I heard this story in my LifeGroup a few years ago. (A LifeGroup is just a small group of people who get together every week to help each other grow in their faith. You can find out more at the Next Steps center. Shameless plug over). Anyway, here's the story: One man in our congregation had his brother and sister-in-law staying with him, along with their kids, for the weekend. As always, he felt this tension about whether or not to invite them to church, because they didn't normally go to church. All the fears of what they might think, what might be said, how it might be taken, how that would affect their relationship, were coming to the fore. But, he stuck out his neck and did it anyway.

To his surprise, they said they would love to come! Sunday rolled around and they arrived at church and everything was pretty uneventful, until after the service one woman walked up to the family in the lobby, and approached this man's niece. Now, you see this teenage girl was wearing clothes that were very appropriate for the hot weather outside: a short skirt and a strappy top that revealed her shoulders and the top of her chest. Unfortunately, this woman did not think these clothes were appropriate for church.

This woman couldn't believe that someone would dare show up in God's house in such a revealing outfit. She believed that when we come on a Sunday, we must bring our very best to God, and that we must dress modestly and appropriately so as not to cause anyone to stumble.

So, she walked over to the family, turned to the teenage niece and told her: "You really should wear something more appropriate in church. God asks for our best and for us to dress modestly around others, and you should think more carefully about what you wear next time."

Now, I know this story is shocking, and I am deeply sorry to that family that it ever happened. But it illustrates a very important point. Every weekend we make assumptions about the people around us. This woman made an assumption about this young girl: that she was an insider; that she was one of us; that she

was a church-person. That's why she felt the need to approach her and give her a reprimand. But that assumption was false.

Every weekend, those of us who are regulars around here, make assumptions about who the people are around us. We see someone looking a little lost or lonely and we go: "I don't recognize them. But, this is a big church. There's lots of people here I don't recognize. I'm sure they're just looking for their friends." Or we see a new person in our row and we go, "Oh, I don't recognize them. But maybe it's because they just used to sit in the balcony. I'm sure they're fine." Or we are walking in from the parking lot with someone and we think, "I haven't seen them before. Or have I? Maybe I have. Oh, but I don't remember their name. Oh, I don't want to offend them. I'll just stay silent."

Every weekend, we make assumptions about the people around us. And for most of us regulars those assumptions are: they are church people, and I don't need to talk to them, because I have my own church people. I don't have time for more friends, or I'm nervous to step out, or I don't want to embarrass myself. And most of the time, you're right. 95% of the people here on a weekend are regular attenders. But what if the people we see are part of that 5% and we end up ignoring them? Well, then our welcome really wouldn't be all that great.

The Bible has several themes running through it. One of those themes is hospitality. From the beginning until the end, the people of God are encouraged to show hospitality to those who are not their own people. The Old Testament—the part of the Bible from before Jesus was born—tells God's people that they are to treat foreigners as they would natives (that's from Leviticus 19:33-34 if you are taking notes) and that true worship was to share food with the hungry and provide the wanderer with shelter (Isaiah 58:7).

But this theme of hospitality is even more pronounced in the New Testament—the second part of the Bible. It was required of church leaders that they would be hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8); you couldn't lead a church unless you demonstrated love towards guests. But it was expected of every person in the church. "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling," writes Peter, the leader of the early church (1 Peter 4:9). The letter to the Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2). (Yes, we believe angels exist here at Chapel Hill, in case you were wondering. But we don't believe that every time a bell rings an angel gets its wings). And there are other passages besides this. Just Google "Hospitality in the Bible" and you'll find them.

But the verse I felt most called to, as I was preparing this week, comes from the letter to the church in Rome, which was written by Paul, one of the earliest leaders of the church. We studied this letter last year and we know that it begins by Paul explaining how ultimately it is Jesus who has offered us the greatest example of hospitality ever. He gave up his home in heaven to come and be with us on earth, he died in our place, so that we might return to our true home in heaven, welcomed by him into eternal love and peace. And after he has explained all this, he turns around and says: because this is true, you should live differently. And in the midst of a long list of ways that Paul expects those whom Jesus has saved to live differently, he writes these words: "Pursue hospitality." (Romans 12:13).

Pursue hospitality. Hospitality in this verse, as in the rest of the Bible, is love directed towards outsiders. The context is Paul saying, "Contribute to the needs of the saints [that is, the insiders] and pursue hospitality [that is the outsiders]." Throughout the New Testament, hospitality is love directed towards guests, strangers, outsiders.

But as I was sitting there preparing this week, I got fixated on the first of those two words: pursue. Why does Paul use that word? He could have said, "Be hospitable," or, "show hospitality," or even, "don't neglect hospitality." But instead, he says pursue. Pursue like a car chase in a movie. Pursue like you are a spy hunting down someone. Pursue like you are desperate for Chick-Fil-A and willing to drive all the way across the

bridge, deal with the mess that is the Nalley Valley interchange and finally get that spicy deluxe sandwich with waffle fries and Chick-Fil-A sauce. Just me?

Why does Paul say pursue? Let me show you. I need some help. Could I get 6 volunteers? OK, congregation, you represent the world, and these 6 represent the church. Now, if you're going to be a good church, could you demonstrate to the world that you are all one, by forming a circle and holding hands?

That's interesting. They've faced inward. I didn't give them that assignment, but they chose to. I want to suggest to you that it's natural for churches to form a community and enjoy one another. To think alike, to talk alike and to act alike. And if they stay here it's easy to become an 'inwardly-focused church.' Notice where they're at in relationship to the rest of you—the world. Their backs are to you.

Paul says pursue hospitality because our natural tendency is to do the very opposite. Our tendency is to focus inwards on one another. And even if we do choose to think about hospitality, this is what we tend to do. [Turn one person around to face outward.] Here, you're on welcome this week. You be in charge of all the outsiders. We're going to keep our little holy huddle over here and you make sure all the guests are taken care of.

And while I think it is important to have a team dedicated to welcoming guests, Paul doesn't write to the church and say, "Don't forget to have someone serve on the welcome team every Sunday," or, "Make sure you have a hospitality team." No, he says to everyone: "Pursue hospitality." This is not a calling for a select few, but a culture for all.

Every single one of us is called to pursue hospitality [begin to turn people around one by one]. Every single one of us is called to push against our natural tendency to focus on ourselves, on our friends, on our people, and to face outward. To open our eyes, to not make the assumption that they're just fine, or we have a welcome team to take care of them, but to step up and pursue hospitality. [Send volunteers back to seats.]

Pursue hospitality. Do you know what else caught my attention about that word pursue? The tense of the verb. It is in the present tense. What that means is that our pursuit of hospitality is not a one time event. It's not pursue hospitality this week, and you're done. It's not pursue hospitality for the Your Welcome series and then give up. This is a culture that Paul is calling us to cultivate. We must all always be pursuing hospitality.

And I could continue to hit you over the head with this, which honestly is a bit like what the New Testament does. But it may not actually change your desires, because, hospitality is hard. It's much easier to come to church and think about me. What has God got for me this morning. I hope we sing my favorite songs. I hope my favorite seat is available. I hope my friends are going to be there. Hospitality is hard because it challenges our own desire for personal comfort.

And at times, if we were brutally honest, we treat church like we treat the gym. We are members so we have access to a place where we can get the goods or services we want. And we pay someone to take care of the new people at the new member desk so that we don't have to worry about them. And when it gets busy and our favorite class is full or our favorite piece of equipment is occupied, we get frustrated that there are more people here than there used to be.

But the Church is not like the gym. Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple (the archbishop is the leader of 85 million Christians who describe themselves as Anglican) said, "The Church ... exists for the wellbeing and fraternity of its non-members." The Church, ultimately, does not exist for the sake of its members. The Church exists for the sake of God's mission to this world. God's mission to seek and to save the lost. God's mission to reconcile the world to himself in Christ Jesus. The Church exists for the sake of that

mission. The Church is not a gym; it doesn't exist for the sake of its members. The Church exists for the sake of its non-members. And every single one of us who call ourselves a church member is a beneficiary of that mission.

When I was a teenager I didn't attend church. I grew up in England so we don't have an equivalent term, but in American terms you probably would have called me a jock. Rugby occupied the majority of my time. And I lived for the weekend when I could get out on the field and smash some people up, and then go out on the town and smash some beers up. One night I was at a party in the Hellfire Caves in High Wycombe when I got invited to church by a girl named Emily. Yes, you heard that right, I got invited to church when I was in the Hellfire Caves.

So I went. I remember pulling up in the parking lot, turning off my car, and just sitting there. "What if Emily isn't there?" I thought. "What if I don't know anyone? What if no one speaks to me?" I was growing more anxious by the second. Eventually I plucked up the courage to walk inside. Now this was a medium sized church, by British standards, that is, it had more than 30 people in it (everything is smaller in the UK), and I remember walking in and realizing: "I stick out. They know I'm new." I got handed a bulletin and welcomed and then I stepped in.

I kept looking around for Emily. I couldn't see her. My first thought was, "Where's the loo? I could kill some time there while I wait." At that moment, I saw someone bounding towards me. I recognized him from school, but this wasn't someone I had been particularly nice to over the years, so in reality I would much rather have met a stranger. But this guy, Tim, reached out and shook my hand and said, "Ellis, what are you doing here?" (Now, side comment, this wasn't the best greeting possible. But it was a greeting.)

"Emily invited me." I said.

"You know Emily?" replied Tim.

"Yes."

"That's great! Well there's a bunch of us who are sitting together over here. Come sit with us. I'm sure Emily will be here soon."

And that was it. That was the beginning of a transformation in my life. That church taught me what Christian community looked like. It showed me love. It gave me my first opportunity to preach. My first opportunity to lead worship. My first opportunity to minister to others. I stand here today preaching God's word to you because two people—Emily and Tim—realized that the church didn't exist for the benefit of its members. Two people who were willing to put aside their own comfort and risk inviting and then welcoming a particularly intimidating rugby player to church.

Today, there are people here who were just like me on that day 12 years ago. You won't recognize them, because they look just like all the regular church people you don't recognize. But they are here. And they are searching for something, just like I was. Searching for something they couldn't find elsewhere. For me, I couldn't find it in success or popularity. For them it might be something different. But they are here. (If that's you, by the way, know that God wants you to experience his love for you this weekend. Know that there is more to your life than what you're living. And if you stick around I guarantee you that you will experience it. Because I've seen it happen time and time again.)

Back to those of you who are regular attenders... These people I was just speaking to are your guests. Not my guests. Not the welcome team's guests. Your guests. And you have the power to change their life forever, just like Emily and Tim changed mine.

So I want to challenge you, who are regular attenders here, to start doing one thing every single week: introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Don't assume that they are a regular or that they are a guest. Just introduce yourself to them and ask them their name. Ask them where they live. Ask them what they do for a living. Make small talk—yes, introverts, I know you hate it, but if Jesus died on a cross for you, you can make small talk to another human being. Show them that someone noticed them. Treat them like your guest, even if it turns out they are a regular.

And if you're worried about whether you've met them before or not, and whether you should know their name, please remember that it's worse for me than for you. If I can have the courage to walk up to someone and say, "I don't know if we've met before, but I'm Ellis, what's your name." And then stand there as they say, "Yes, I actually sat in your office and told you my life story." But if I can do that and still come through unscathed, you can walk up to someone, introduce yourself, ask them their name and start a conversation.

Pursue hospitality. Every Saturday night or Sunday morning find one person and make a friend. Every week. Just one person doing that changed my life. Think about the impact 1000 people doing that every week would have. Think about the potential for affecting change in this world if people walked out of this building every week knowing they are noticed, and that someone cares for them. Pursue hospitality. Let's pray.