

# God's kind of hospitality

28 August 2022 – Share Sunday

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

Share Sunday is an opportunity for the whole of the Uniting Church to celebrate the incredible community services being undertaken by every part of our wider church.

I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the word 'hospitality'?

- What might that look like for you – at home, at the local café or restaurant, or at church?
- What's involved in offering hospitality?
- What is special about **God's** kind of hospitality?
- And finally, how does our hospitality reflect God's kind of hospitality?

## BIBLE READING (Jean Hill)

Hebrews 13:1-3, 8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured...

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever ... Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely ...

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will

be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

He also said to the one who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

Lord, may your word live in us  
**and bear much fruit for your glory.**

### MESSAGE God's kind of hospitality

Offering hospitality is part of being human – it happens across all cultures and all religions. We are social creatures by nature. It's one reason why the covid lockdowns were so difficult for so many people – we were cut off from gathering and meeting with family, friends and work colleagues – and despite the technical marvel of programs like Zoom, it's just doesn't provide the same experience as being in the same physical space with others.



We each have preferred ways of offering – and receiving – hospitality. Some of us like to welcome people into our homes while others prefer to gather at a café or restaurant or perhaps outdoors at a park.

And of course we have all sorts of unwritten rules and etiquette about hospitality. For instance, it's often expected that a guest will bring a small gift as a sign of thanks to the host – a bunch of fresh flowers, or some edible treat or sometimes a bottle of wine.



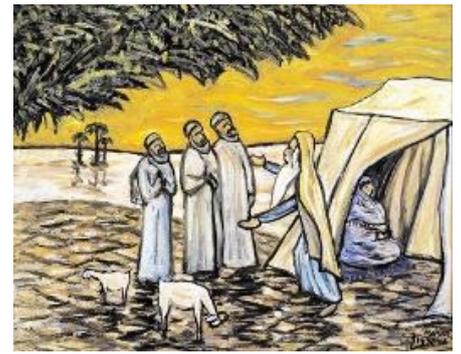
The host has a trickier role – especially with so many differing dietary needs these days and the desire to make guests feel welcome. Hosts worry whether their place is tidy enough and perhaps how to politely suggest that people don't spend their whole time looking at their mobile phone.

In the biblical culture of the Middle East, hospitality was a big deal. It was – and still is today – considered an **honour** to have guests in your home. The host was expected to serve their



finest food and everyone had a designated place to sit or recline. Women were usually responsible for preparing the meal and often ate separately to men. Only invited guests were welcomed.

... which is why there is quite a stir in Abraham's family when three random strangers stop by his tent in the middle of the day as told in Genesis 18. Being well trained in hospitality, Abraham invites the three strangers to rest, wash their feet and enjoy some food that Sarah and her servants hastily prepare.



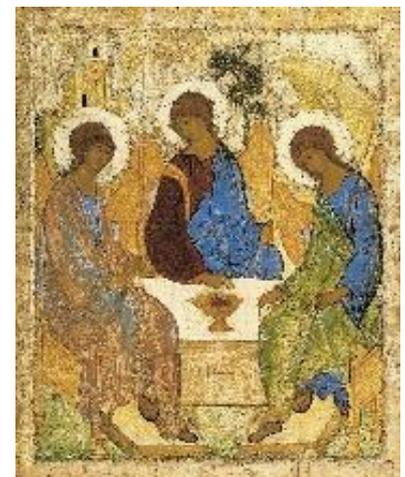
It turns out that these three are no random strangers. They bring messages for Abraham and Sarah about having a son. They also share God's intent to bring disaster and judgment against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Are these men in



fact **angels**, come to bring messages from God to Abraham and Sarah and to protect their nephew Lot from the coming destruction? Hence the verse we read in Hebrews about the importance of showing hospitality to strangers for by doing that some - like Abraham - have entertained angels without knowing it.

Or - as the unfolding conversation in Genesis suggests - are these three figures **God** in human form - the three members of the Trinity - as suggested by the famous icon written by Rublev known as the Trinity icon?

If so, then **God's sort of hospitality** transforms our usual thinking and etiquette around hospitality. These three figures in many ways become **hosts** rather than **guests**, as Jesus often did around the meal table.



Jesus was probably a much sought after dinner guest - someone with a unique slant on life - and someone who steered the conversation into interesting and controversial areas. Jesus was sometimes maligned as a **glutton** and a **drunkard** - which suggests he rather liked dinner table gatherings.

But Jesus noticed who tended to get invited to the

meals where he was a guest of honour – rich neighbours and friends of the host plus of course their brothers and sisters and other family members. This followed two rules of etiquette – only invite people of the same social standing as yourself, who – by the rule of reciprocity – will feel obliged invite you back to **their** dinner parties.

... and while Jesus was apparently quite happy to eat with important and well-connected people like the leader of the Pharisees in today's reading – he was also content to eat with the poor, with foreigners and with people regarded with suspicion and contempt – people like tax collectors.

In keeping with Jesus' upside down way of looking at the world, he challenged his disciples to stop following the unwritten rules of hospitality – and to start inviting the people who were **never invited** and who **couldn't repay** you – the poor, the lame, the crippled and the blind.

Inviting these people will result in blessing – not a return invitation – but a reward in heaven.



From this insight we might have to **unlearn** some of our hidden prejudices.

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*Hospitality is not **transactional** – I do this for you, so you will do this for me in the future*

*Hospitality is not about **control** – or about trying to make **clones** of yourself who will think and act just like you*

*Neither is hospitality about **competition** – impressing others by what you wear, what you offer to eat or how you entertain your guests*

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**Genuine** hospitality – **God's** form of hospitality – is generous and gentle and seeks to **engage** with our guests, to be **mutually** enriched by the conversation, and to celebrate diversity as a foretaste of heaven where there will be people from every tribe, language and nation. The danger – as well as the great blessing – of hospitality is the possibility that **we** will be changed, that **our** understanding of life will be broadened, that **our** compassion and empathy for others will be deepened as we listen to the stories of our guests.

At this point I could share some of the amazing stories I've had the privilege to hear

from asylum seekers and the stories from some of the people who come to the Tuesday meals program here, or those who come to Helping Hand or the Playgroups at Croydon. All of these stories are from people with their own set of **challenges** and their own **hopes** for the future. Each one is a person known by God and is so much more than a number or a statistic. And that is something I have to remember when I speak with them or get annoyed by some of their less endearing habits.

But today is SHARE Sunday – originally set aside to remember the ministries and financial needs of **UnitingCare**. Today UnitingCare and several other Uniting Church agencies have combined under the banner of **Uniting**.

So I want to share just a little with you about programs and projects that Uniting runs in Croydon and Ringwood, starting right here at Gifford Village in Croydon North.

This place was developed as a collaboration between the congregation here at Croydon North Uniting Church and Uniting Harrison. It recognised the diverse accommodation challenges that people face – especially when they are living with a disability, or are a single parent or living with mental illness – the sorts of people who find it hard to hold down a regular job that can pay for a commercial rent.



Gifford Village was opened seven years ago – offering eighteen independent living units of different sizes, with a community centre and worship space in the middle of the property. The whole property is an experiment in **social housing** with tenants paying a subsidised rent. There is a weekly art program in the studio downstairs and a weekly meals program at lunchtime on Tuesdays open to anybody in the community and of course worship happens here at 10 am on Sundays. The whole site is managed by Uniting.

While some people may be disappointed by the level of participation in church activities by many of the residents, I think Jesus would be pleased with the stable and secure hospitality offered here and the open-ended relationships we have with several of the residents who are among the poor, the lame and the crippled who live in our community.

**Uniting in Ringwood** also offer housing services. Unlike here at Gifford Village, though, at Ringwood, Uniting help people impacted by family violence, homelessness and youth seeking refuge. They offer short term accommodation and help and advocate for people struggling to find rental properties. This is not glamorous or high profile. In some ways it's like a lifeboat picking people up out of the water in a flood who have nowhere else to go. It's about helping people at their time of desperate need.

Then there is **Uniting in Croydon**, at the site of the former Croydon Central Methodist Church, which brought together Canterbury Family Services, Copelen youth services and Wheeler's Hill Family Centre to form **UnitingCare Connections**.

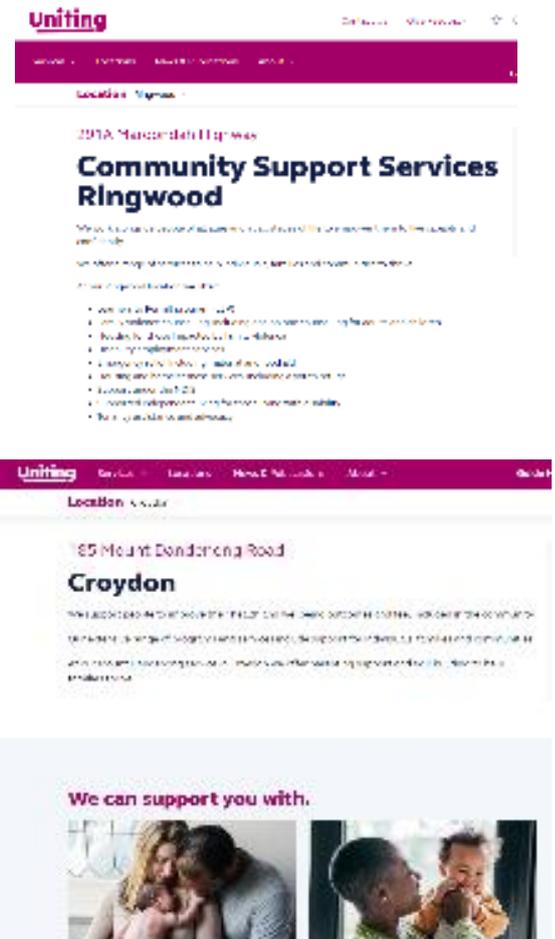
With this background it's no surprise that the current Uniting operation at Croydon focuses on **families** who are struggling in various ways, offering parenting support, counselling and programs to improve the wellbeing of families. And of course Uniting also provide us the space that Helping Hand operates from.

In the words of Hebrews 11, I don't have time to tell of two mental health communities run by our presbytery – **Hope Springs** at Heidelberg Heights and **Boorondara Community Outreach** in Kew, or about the work of Prahran mission or Hotham mission who provide accommodation for asylum seekers ... or of the long established work of Frontier Services.

In every example we've mentioned this morning, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus who was both **intentional** and **compassionate** in welcoming and visiting people from every corner of life, whether they were friends, strangers or enemies, meeting them at their point of need or distress and always without expecting any reciprocal benefit in return.

May we continue to learn from and be inspired by his example of hospitality.

It would be fairly typical at this point of Share Sunday to invite you to make a financial donation to the work of Uniting. I'm very happy if you choose to do this ...



but this morning I want to offer you a different sort of challenge.

You're about to be given a small gift that contains **two teabags**, one for you to enjoy and one to share with someone else, preferably not your spouse. The invitation is to find someone to share this gift with – with no strings attached – other than on the teabags!

Should you take up this challenge you would be sharing some hospitality and of course some of your time. And who knows where the conversation might go and how you might be changed by the experience.