

02.09.25 ~ Epiphany 5
“What Precedes Hospitality?”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 24 ^{NIV}

- ¹ The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
² for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.
- ³ Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.
- ⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Savior.
⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.
- ⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.
- ⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory?
The Lord Almighty—
he is the King of glory.

Leader: These Words of Prayer and Praise Are from God.

People: Thanks be to God!

Philemon 1:1-12 ^{NLT}

Greetings from Paul

¹ This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, ² and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.

³ May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Paul’s Thanksgiving and Prayer

⁴ I always thank my God when I pray for you, Philemon, ⁵ because I keep hearing about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God’s people. ⁶ And I am

praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ.⁷ Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people.

Paul's Appeal for Onesimus

⁸ That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do.⁹ But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.

¹⁰ I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison.¹¹ Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.¹² I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

Leader: These Words of Paul Are from God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Welcoming God, we gather again this Sunday to join in worship and fellowship with you and each other. Thank you for the words, prayers, and music already shared. Help us to find a message in our worship and in these words that broadens our minds about hospitality. Clear our thoughts, Lord, to receive your direction as we open this topic to bridge our church identity and purpose with our community, our associations, and our world. May **your** voice strengthen us for the week to come, motivating us to dig deeper into Scripture daily as we seek your presence. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thank you, Sean and Cara, for being with us today and for your reflections and greetings. We are just getting to know CBF better, even though we've been associated for many years. Keep up the good work representing our region!

And Happy early Valentine's Day! And Souper Bowl Day! Both kinds of Souper Bowl. As we bring non-perishable food to help others, may you enjoy tonight's game, but I'll not take sides from the pulpit.

Today's topic was supposed to be the Border experience, ACCA, and our Food Mission, clearly topics related to our theme "Vital Hospitality," but as I began to study this huge topic, it became clear that

we need to examine the purpose first behind hospitality. I confess that a giant “To Do List” of building repairs, paving, landscaping, decorating, a massive marketing campaign, finding more volunteers and having more social events fed the original concept. And yes, we will be sharing and implementing those ideas in the second half of 2025, but first things first.

Why is hospitality vital? Our values like love, hope, faith, joy, kindness, mercy, building community, relationships, healing, creativity, mission, and evangelism must be examined before the physical actions have any meaning. Prayer, praise, confession, and reflection all must come first so that our intentions are true. So, what precedes the actions we typically associate with hospitality, like potlucks, guest bags, better signage, coffee shops, bookstores, hotels, spas, and such? Personal and spiritual preparation come first. We must acknowledge the glory of God’s initial earthly creation, our own design, assets, and needs as well as the value and needs of others; these are God’s gifts of grace and hospitality.

Our psalm today does that very well by praising God’s glory and kingdom yet reminding the writer and reader that holy preparation is necessary to enter. Although it cannot be proven, many scholars assume this psalm was written when David took the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem; others say it was written about some other return to Jerusalem after a battle victory. This praise poem acknowledges God’s sovereignty over all things. Only those with clean hands and a pure heart are worthy to enter God’s presence in worship, but of course, we know differently because of Jesus. Because of him, we are forgiven, offered salvation, transformation, and therefore can experience God’s presence through Christ and the Holy Spirit. As I said last week, we don’t offer kindness

and hospitality **because** it is the cultural expectation (even though some do); we offer hospitality because Jesus teaches radical hospitality in our key verses from Luke 14:

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Christ models this hospitality for us at the wedding in Cana, his generous miracles, foot washing, in the feeding of the 5,000 and more.

The apostle Paul’s most personal letter to Philemon models a different kind of hospitality, yet vital to our faith. The church at Colosse met in Philemon’s home, a common practice up to 200 AD (another sample of hospitality practiced today among church planters). Philemon had become a believer in Jesus through Paul’s influence, and Onesimus, his runaway slave, had met Paul and become a great help to him while his was in a Roman prison. During their growing friendship, Onesimus became a Christ follower as well. They became co-workers in sharing the gospel, so Paul never thought of Onesimus as a slave. He wrote this letter sending him back to Philemon but requested his freedom and acknowledged him as an equal brother and colleague in Jesus. Neither Jesus nor Paul distinguished faith by class or status, an important message for us to remember.

Handwritten letters are rare today and yet are a beautiful act of hospitality, especially a thank you note. The salutation of this letter conveys Paul’s gratitude and peace available through God’s grace and Jesus. I love the phrasing of this prayer, and we see it in other letters.

Today, however, think of it in terms of being hospitable to the stranger: “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.” Do we always thank God for the disruption of a stranger asking for help? Philemon’s faith in Christ showed his love for his friends; Paul says, “the saints” and includes his new friend, Onesimus. This love would refresh the hearts of Philemon’s household as Onesimus blessed Paul so much that he became like a son to him. It was a sacrifice to send him back to Colosse.

This passage demonstrates not just Onesimus’ “usefulness” but also his humility, surrender to Christ, and his capacity to love, even after having been a slave. Christ transforms lives! We will learn more of this story and these three men in our letter next week, so read the whole thing – it is only one chapter!

As we slowly review and renew our hospitable actions, let us praise God for our own welcoming relationship with **him**; let us **pray** for direction as we go forward, remembering that because of his son Jesus, we too are released from the slavery of sin. Let us love one another and share Jesus as we go. Hospitality is not just a good thing to **do**; we must offer it with intentional purpose. Hospitality is lifegiving to your spiritual, emotional, and physical self as well as to our community; it is essential to the life and thriving of this church! Amen? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Jesus, we thank you for your teaching, your life model, and your sacrifice. Open our hearts personally and as a church to answer your call to hospitality for 2025. May your divine guidance strengthen our own Bible study, mission, and purpose, drawing us together to pray, seek you, serve others in need, and to share our faith. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.