



## HOSPITALITY

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The September theme is Hospitality.

It was Abraham who long ago set the bar for hospitality so high. His storied welcome of three total strangers tells us what true hospitality looks like. Abraham did not wait for the unannounced visitors to arrive at his tent; he ran out in the heat of the day to greet them, inviting them under the shade of his oaks. He did not ask for names, country of origin or photo ID. Instead he bowed, requesting the privilege of washing their feet. Offering them “a little bread,” he did not serve whatever he had on hand. He ordered fresh cakes made from choice flour and a tender calf from his herd slaughtered and prepared especially for the three strangers whose names he did not know, wayfarers who turned out to be God or angels.

How far we’ve come. If someone called me to ask what Abraham’s example might mean today, would I even pick up the phone if I didn’t recognize their caller ID?

Hospitality is often regarded as the basis of one’s relationship with God or with the holy blessing of Life itself. In folklore from around the world, God shows up disguised – as beggar, foreigner, undesirable neighbor or even pesky creature – and the one who opens the door and welcomes the stranger to the table is the one who “entertains angels unawares.” Not only does this earn favor in God’s eyes; it also, not coincidentally, creates a harmonic social order in which food and shelter are shared and the possibility of friendship is invited. Hospitality is both an ethical and a practical virtue.

The understanding subtly woven into many hospitality stories and customs is one of reciprocity in which the roles of guest and host are cosmically linked and known to shift. In Arabic, Latin and Greek etymology, a single root word connotes both guest and host, suggesting a basic truth – the person who is host on one day will be guest on another.

So what does hospitality ask of us today? What do we ask of ourselves, as both host and guest?

Arab custom says the guest – including the stranger or even the enemy – has a right to three days’ hospitality before the host can send you on your way. It is a practice engendered in a hostile desert environment where Bedouins appreciated the price of common survival as the sharing of food and shelter.

Here, in our own verdant and well watered summer, as rivers run high and tomatoes hang heavy on the vines, we are certainly called to share the harvest bounty with those who hunger, near and far. But our hospitality might also be wisely shaped by asking what other kinds of desert conditions exist in our own lives today. If we hunger for relationship, are we running out to meet the strangers passing by? If the heat of the day has hardened the landscape in politics and religion, are we making room for others under the shade of our oaks? Are we bringing them water, without knowing their names – or how they last voted?

In a climate made hostile by polarization and alienation, a free faith tradition declaring “We need not think alike to love alike,” surely has welcome shade to offer. Are we opening our doors wide to those who most need it?

If you have a great view from your window, the Sufi poet Hafiz said, you really ought to share it. He wrote:

*Friends do things like this:*

*Tell which mat their housekey is*

*Hidden under. . . .*

*For you would not believe*

*The extraordinary view*

*Of God*

*From my bedroom*

*Window.*

### HOSPITALITY Worship Theme Resources

#### Books

***Reaching Out***, by Henri Nouwen, an insightful exploration of hospitality as a spiritual practice

***Radical Hospitality***, by Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Homan, stories and wisdom culled from the discipline of hospitality at the root of Benedictine life.

***The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris***, by David McCullough, a sweeping historical account of the many 19th century American intellectuals and artists who made their home in Paris.