Today is the kick-off Sunday to our annual pledge campaign, where we encourage each other to prayerfully consider the ways that Niles Discovery Church supports our spiritual lives and the living out of our faith, and consider how we will make a commitment to support the church financially in the coming year.

Our theme this year is “welcome. grow. serve.” which some of you with long memories may recall is the same theme as last year. We made the decision to use this theme again partly because Pastor Jeff and I liked it so much. We feel it perfectly captures in just three little words the whole mission and purpose of Niles Discovery Church: to welcome people on all walks of life into our community, to grow in our relationships with God and each other, and to serve our community and the world in the way that Jesus served others through his life and ministry.

Over the next three weeks, you’ll be hearing sermons on this theme, and you’ll also be hearing some short testimonials from congregation members about how Niles Discovery Church encourages them to welcome, grow, and serve.

Today I’ll be looking at the first word in the theme, that of welcome. As I pondered potential scripture texts for today, I realized how much there was about hospitality and welcome in the Bible, and that there were many directions I could go in. Some of you will say that I got a little carried away, since I chose three scriptures—I just couldn’t narrow it down to just one, and at first glance it might be hard to see how they all go together, but if you bear with me, I think you’ll see what I discovered—that these texts illuminate three types of hospitality, or perhaps another way to think of it would be a progressive development of hospitality.

Hospitality is kind of written into the DNA of the Bible, right from the beginning. God creates an abundant Earth and offers a garden filled with life for Adam and Eve. The theme continues in our first reading for today, where Abraham and Sarah greet three strangers in the desert. We are told that God is visiting Abraham, but he doesn’t know that at first; all he sees are three strangers who need hospitality, and he offers them the best of his household—the finest flour for bread, a tender calf, and precious water for washing the dust from their feet.

In one regard, Abraham and Sarah are following “the ancient law of the desert, practiced among the nomadic peoples of the Near East, which required that if a stranger appeared at your tent, you were to welcome them, and share your food, drink and shelter. In the searing heat of the desert,
the law of hospitality was a matter of human survival. It is still practiced among the Bedouins today.”

Hospitality to strangers is one of the big themes of the Bible. When the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years, God provides them with manna and water, as a gracious host would. When the refugees finally enter the Promised Land and settle down, hospitality is written into their holy law. In Exodus and Deuteronomy and Leviticus, scripture tells us to love the alien and the stranger and not to oppress them, for once we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The theme of hospitality continues into the New Testament when Jesus teaches that acts of welcome and hospitality are actually a key indicator of a person's relationship with God. In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” The Book of Hebrews reiterates this teaching, making reference to our Genesis story of Abraham and Sarah; “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Clearly, willingness to extend hospitality to strangers is fundamental in the Bible and important to the Christian way of life. For Abraham and Sarah, hospitality involved the obvious: offering food, drink and shelter to a stranger. In the Bible, however, hospitality is a much richer, larger concept. True hospitality is not an action we do reluctantly, out of a sense of duty, but is more an attitude, a character of the heart, out of which generous actions naturally flow.

As Rev. Kathlyn James, a United Methodist minister puts it, “Hospitality is a habit of the heart that must be cultivated. Which requires, first of all, that we overcome our initial human response of hostility toward people who are strange to us. The Latin root of our English word, ‘hostility,’ is hostis, which means enemy. Our task [as followers of Jesus] is to turn the stranger who is perceived as an enemy, a hostis, into a hospes, which is the Latin word for ‘guest.’ This is where our English word, ‘hospitality,’ comes from.”

Our next scripture text offers an example of taking hospitality a step further—from welcoming strangers who show up to actually going out and inviting strangers in.

This story appears in both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, it’s described as a wedding feast, and here in Luke, it’s just a big dinner, to which many important guests have been invited. When the big shots all decline with various lame excuses, the host decides to send his servants out to bring in everyone off the streets, in particular those who are disadvantaged. “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town,” he says, “and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the servants do this, and tell him, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” So the host says, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.”

The people he invites have to be “compelled” to come to the party, because they are so unused to being invited to such great affairs.

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
Lest you think that what happens in the Bible never happens in real life, I’ll introduce you to the Duane family of Sacramento, CA. These are the parents of Quinn Duane, whose fiancé called off their wedding just five days before the celebration. Rather than let the reception food go to waste, the family decided to invite the homeless to eat the tri-tip and salmon that had been prepared for the wedding guests. The Duanes felt good that their dinner was going to a worthy cause, and some who came to the feast called it “a blessing,” to have one family’s sadness be turned to a special day for others who didn’t expect it. As one resident of a local shelter put it, “This is not coming out of our kitchen. We love our chef Leo, but he wouldn’t be preparing nothing like this.”

This story reminds us of the centrality of table fellowship to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus ate with the rich and wealthy and powerful of his day, but he was just as likely to share a table with the sinners and outcasts, and he constantly reminded people that all were welcome at God’s table. Feeding people was so important that the feeding of the multitudes is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels, and it appears twice in Mark and Matthew.

The great feast was for Jesus a metaphor of the Kin-dom of God; all people are welcome to the abundance of God’s love, and no one is to be left out, regardless of how we humans try to create a hierarchy of worthiness. Those who are most disadvantaged are most welcome to sit at the table. In this parable from Luke’s gospel, Jesus invites us to up our hospitality game a notch, and not only welcome those who might show up at our door, but to actually go out and invite people in—and not just those whom we think are worthy, but all who are in need of God’s abundant love.

But welcoming strangers and inviting people in aren’t even enough, if we’re really following Jesus. In our story from the gospel according to Mark, Jesus is confronted by a man named Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. The crowd tries to shush him, but Bartimaeus continues to cry out until Jesus hears him and calls him over. And Jesus, unlike everyone else, notices this man on the margins of society, and sees him not as a blind beggar with nothing to offer, but for what Bartimaeus truly is—a beloved child of God. And Jesus asks him the key question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus asks for his sight to be restored and Jesus makes it so.

Jesus offered the ultimate in hospitality: not to merely offer food and drink, but to see the other as a person worthy of healing, worthy of humanity, and then asked him what he needed to be whole.

What if, instead of a nice meal in a fancy hotel in Sacramento, the homeless folks had been asked what they needed? Maybe what one really needed was a suit and a haircut so he could go on a job interview. Maybe what another needed was childcare in the afternoons so she could go to school. Maybe what another needed was reliable transportation, or help regulating his medications so he could stay steady enough to go to work. Food and water and a place to rest are important. But real hospitality—real welcome—comes when we learn to see each stranger we

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meet as a precious child of God and learn to ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” May it be so. Amen.