

# Hospitality in a Hectic World

Why pizza and paper plates are sometimes the best choice?

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- Written by Judith Couchman

My sister Barbara and her family visited me in Colorado recently. They arrived during lunchtime and could stay only briefly, since they were driving from Arizona to Nebraska. So I assembled sandwiches, and we plopped in the dining room to munch and talk. About two hours later I handed Barb a bag of snacks for the road, and the threesome climbed into their truck, bade a wistful good-bye, and traveled toward home, refreshed.

As I walked from the yard into the house, I congratulated myself. Good job, Judy. You're finally learning to relax about tending to guests. Maybe there's hope for you yet!

For me, creating a quick lunch for out-of-towners marked a major mind-set change about hospitality. In the past I'd have spent hours preparing for their visit—cleaning the house, shopping for groceries, cooking a sumptuous meal, arranging a memorable table setting—even though our time together was short. This time the place mats didn't even match!

God weaves miracles into our hearts. In my case, it's the miracle of offering a simple, flawed hospitality instead of striving for the proverbial "hostess with the mostest" award. A hospitality that—in a hectic and complicated world—nurtures guests without overwhelming and depleting the host.

## Called to Hospitality

In this age of the ubiquitous Martha Stewart, it's easy to feel unsettled about hospitality. After watching Martha mastermind a summer feast for 50, we can decide we're too busy, uncreative, or financially limited to invite company into our homes. Or we may aspire toward her perfection but wind up too depleted to enjoy the guests when they arrive.

If time, money, and energy were the true measuring sticks for hospitality, then most of us should lock the front door and watch television. But thankfully, our guideline for hosting guests derives from the Bible. In Romans 12 Paul presented a litany for growing strong in the faith. Interestingly, he instructed Christ's followers to "practice hospitality" along with the reminders to "keep your spiritual fervor" and be "faithful in prayer" (vv. 11–13). The apostle considered hospitality

an everyday practice and priority, integrating it with the keys to spiritual growth and vitality.

Yet Paul wasn't referring to "entertaining" as we think of it today. Entertaining emphasizes planning, acquiring resources, and managing an event. Hospitality centers on inviting people into our lives and sharing from what we have, on helping guests feel relaxed and part of the household. Instead of dazzling people with our social skills, we pour God's warmth into their souls. This approach patterns after the early church when believers shared everything in common and eschewed the need to "perform" and impress one another (Acts 2:44).

The New Testament provides glimpses into the open lives of 1st-century Christians. "They broke bread *in their homes* and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46, *emphasis mine*), and "day after day, in the temple courts and *from house to house*, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42, *emphasis mine*). To the church at Corinth, Paul wrote: "The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and *so does the church that meets at their house*" (1 **Cor. 16:19**, *emphasis mine*). Though the temple remained the focus of traditional worship, intimate care and fellowship occurred in the homes. In fact, in those days "church" denoted a body of believers, not a place or structure.

### Making the Time

"When I look at hospitality as practiced in the Word, I have a convicting sense of open homes—open lives, shared tables, ready comfort for weary travelers wandering on dangerous missions in their work for the kingdom," wrote Karen Mains in her classic on hospitality, *Open Heart, Open Home*. From the early believers' example and Paul's instruction, it appears we're all to practice hospitality. Some hosts with creative gifts or extroverted personalities may gather in more guests, more frequently than others of us, but we all can share from our hearts and homes.

But how do we apply this ancient directive, these generous role models, to the hectic 1990s?

If we're convinced of hospitality's necessity for the soul, we'll find the time to be hospitable. I've learned that when it seems I can't afford the time to invite people in—and I welcome them anyway—these gatherings have ranked among my most satisfying.

Uncovering the time for guests can be as simple as adding a plate to the dinner table when a friend unexpectedly stops by, or as organized as reserving

alternating Saturday nights for visitors. It may mean giving up some minor involvements or breaking a couch-potato habit, but the benefits of hospitality outweigh the adjustments. Besides, hospitality doesn't just bless others; it's also a gift to ourselves. It's a time for us to relax, enjoy, and refurbish, too.

### Giving Up Perfection

If we want to relax about hospitality, we must forsake the quest for perfection. For two decades I've been inviting people into my home, and though friends say I'm a gifted hostess, a hospitable occasion seldom runs perfectly.

In the last two years I've had guests forget to bring potluck dishes, inform me they're allergic to my food, get sick during their stay, mess up my carpets, break silver punch cups, arrive hours late, or not show up. Rain has dismantled a backyard barbecue, the kitchen plumbing has backed up an hour before a Thanksgiving celebration, and the Christmas tree has crashed and fallen apart just before guests arrived.

It's not that I haven't *tried* for perfection. It's that God has been teaching me that true hospitality isn't about *fussing*. I'm not advocating that we never fix a gourmet meal, decorate for a party, or straighten up the house. But when perfection grows more important than people, we're missing the point. Hospitality is about being together, and when we refuse to fret, choose to laugh away the mishaps, and delight in our guests, it proves we truly care about them.

### Staying Flexible

Earlier this year, after some difficulties synching schedules, I finally arranged a dinner with my friends Steve and Annie. We planned it as an adults-only evening at my house so we could relax and talk in depth without kids underfoot. Wanting the evening to be an oasis from their stressful lives, I put loving care into the table setting and the food.

Preparations were clipping along smoothly, but then the phone rang. It was Annie.

"Bad news," she said. "Our out-of-town guests left awhile ago, only to call from the interstate to say their car broke down. Steve left in our van to get them, and they'll need to stay at our house again tonight because the weather's getting bad. I guess we can't come over for dinner . . ."

As she talked, I glanced out the window at unexpected snow flurries. *Oh, no*, I groaned inside, *a lovely night ruined. And I have all of this food!* But then it hit me: If they couldn't come for dinner, why couldn't dinner go to them? So Annie

set a table for nine at her home, I carted my entrees across town, and we enjoyed a memorable evening, noisy kids and all.

Driving home later I thought, *Wow, if I'd been my former rigid self, canceling the evening and moping around the house, I'd have missed out on a great time.*

That evening taught me volumes about flexibility. Aware that along with the fun, hospitality can serve us inconveniences, Peter wrote, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet. 4:9). When people arrive without notice or when our least-favorite relatives vacation at our house, a flexible attitude can guide us through. These episodes also give us the opportunity to express Christ's love in gritty situations. Jesus said that with God, all things are possible (Mt. 19:26), and that includes serving with a smile and an open heart when we'd rather be eating snacks and channel surfing in bed.

### Being Yourself

In an episode of the sitcom "Ellen," the main character decides she's a slouch and needs to entertain friends more graciously. This is a new concept to Ellen, a bookstore owner, whose hospitality style usually centers around a box of pizza, a television, and paper napkins if the delivery person brings them. She wants to embrace a more upscale style, though, because recently Martha Stewart visited her store for an autograph session.

In a series of hilarious events Ellen ruins a meal and keeps her company waiting for hours. To top it off, Martha Stewart shows up as an unplanned dinner guest. (Anything can happen on television.) When Martha cues into Ellen's dilemma, she picks up the phone and orders take-out pizza and drinks for the group. Later, sitting on the couch with an exhausted Ellen and her relieved friends, Martha says, "Sometimes pizza is the smartest way to entertain."

When we invite people into our homes, we can remember the adage, "Be yourself." This includes choosing a hospitality style that fits our budget, available time to prepare, attitudes about cooking and cleaning, and basic personality type. In other words, successful hospitality pivots on doing what makes us comfortable so we can comfort our guests. When we're being our real selves instead of who we think we should be, and doing what's natural for us instead of meeting somebody else's expectations, we're most apt to provide a haven of hospitality in a hectic world.

### Focusing on Souls

"As a tonic for a troubled world, friendship and behaving with consideration and care may seem light and even frivolous, but that could be because we have lost

a sensitivity to the values of the soul," claims Thomas Moore in his book *Soul Mates*. Hospitality can revive this sensitivity and nurture the souls passing through our homes.

We touch our visitors' souls by creating a comfortable atmosphere, listening carefully to their words and hearts, offering kindness and encouragement, sharing at a spiritual level, honoring them with touches of grace or beauty, fostering fun times or providing a hideaway to rest—anything that fills inner needs and renews spirits. In turn, we can humbly allow guests to nurture and spiritually refuel us. Caring for the soul constitutes a give-and-take relationship.

My friends Bob and Shirley have modeled how soul care extends to children, too. Often when I visit their home, children and young visitors are lovingly included in the hospitality. Visiting kids sit at the adults' table for meals, join in the conversation, participate in activities, and learn that they're honored guests, too. Occasionally Shirley allows her children to cook and present the entire meal, graciously eating their concoctions without apologizing to guests for any bloopers. Children sense that their contribution matters, and they catch the joy of hospitality. She nurtures their souls.

However we approach caring for people's souls, the goal is to cultivate intimacy with them. "In order to cultivate intimacy we need to find forms of expression that emerge from and touch the soul," explains Moore. "For the most part these things are obvious: a gift that is particularly meaningful, a late-night conversation in which feelings rise to the surface, or a quiet walk with another through woods with few words exchanged. We know that these forms of intimacy are valuable, and yet in our modern world we seem to forget their importance. [But] once we shift our attention from communicating to expressing intimacy, we are on the way to soulfulness in our relationships."

This approach elevates hospitality to a spiritual level, for such "soulfulness" models God's personal relationship and accommodation toward us. He who invited us into a love-filled family circle where we'd find acceptance, encouragement, and inspiration for living in the day to day, urges us to do the same for one another through the avenue of hospitality. When we look at it that way, the question becomes, "How can I not invite people into my home?"

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