

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • October 9, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
Hebrews 13:1-2

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

THE MESSAGE
“You Are Here: God”
Mark Briley

When you get invited to a party, how do you typically respond? Everyone has a natural response. Some of us fall to the extremes. The invite comes: “*Come to my party!*” One says, “*Absolutely!*” and the other says, “*Absolutely NOT!*” Those are the extremes, of course. Most of us are somewhere in between. “*Let me check my schedule,*” or “*I hope I can make it!*”

We’re all a little different and that’s natural as our personalities are different. Some of us take a little time to warm up to invites, and some of us are hot from the jump. You’ve probably got that friend that you text about hanging out who always says “*Yes!*” and you’ve got one you know is going to shoot you down. “*They never go out!*” you say.

They may have any number of plausible or implausible excuses. I saw a t-shirt one time that said, “*Sorry, I’m late. I didn’t want to come.*”

I know this is making some of you uncomfortable already. You just like to be home, and it was a big and brave deal to show up to worship this morning. We’re glad you’re here! And as a fellow introvert, I do understand. A number of us might say about ourselves: “*I’m a bit of a home-body.*”

A homebody is someone who likes to cocoon at home, a place that is safe from having to interact with the world outside of the walls of our safest space. I love my some time at home, which happens very little in my current phase of life. We all get the sentiment, and most seek a healthy balance of time at home and life in the outside world.

The pandemic introduced a growing separation from one another. In fact, we were prescribed a physical distance to maintain. We put tape on the floors of the grocery store, the church, the bank, everywhere – keep your distance... six feet please. We worked from home. We dropped traditions. We stayed in.

The issue? Well, one anyway, was the creation of a chronic isolation that has led to a kind of spiritual homelessness. While we’ve returned to much of the busyness of life, we’re doing so comfortably detached from one another, unaware that we need one another if we are ever to be most fully at home in the world God so loves. This has become such an issue that one church, led by a ministerial colleague I deeply respect, has written an entirely new vision statement to get at this issue of isolation as a church. Their vision is “*to eradicate social isolation and disconnection by practicing the faithful presence of the incarnate Christ.*” How ‘bout that?!

There’s an old wisdom word offered when we become too stuck, too isolated, too near-sighted in God’s wide-open world: “*You need to get out more.*”

Now... I know people have health concerns that they must watch and protect closely – so don’t hear me asking you to risk your physical health. This has become a *spiritual* issue. It’s a relational cry to do life in proximity. When we look at the Trinity – God, Christ, and Spirit – three moving in sync as one – we experience proximity; an engaging relationship; a partnership that God longs for us, the Church, as well. So... let me invite you into this seven-week journey, exploring the ways we may need to get out more.

We launch with what I consider to be a light ask... a toe in the water if you will. If you haven’t been getting out at all with a spiritual intentionality, you may need to work your way back to getting out more.

The running community will often host races for this very purpose – just to get you out and running again (*or for the first time*). They call them “*Couch to 5k*,” meaning you go from not running at all (*couch reference*) to completing a race of just over three miles. It’s a move, and you can’t even get out of the house if you don’t move.

This idea might be expressed when you get an invite from someone and you say (*or at least think in your head*), “*I’ll make an appearance*.” The idea, of course, is that you might show up for just a little while. You don’t plan to close down the party and clean up afterward. You’re just going to pop in, shake a few hands, and head on out. It’s safe. It’s clean. You’ll make an appearance. And that’s a start.

I’ve got some neighbors on my street, who won’t even make an appearance in our neighborhood. They’re sneaky. And maybe you are, too. I’ve got a couple. They’ll be a close encounter once in a while. I’ll be walking the dogs, and they are pulling into their garage at about the same time I’m walking on the sidewalk in front of their house. I’m not seeking out the moment – I’m not *that* neighbor – I’m just walking the dogs, and here’s a natural moment where we could potentially meet, since they’re pulling in at the same time. I’m not looking for a long-term commitment here. I’ve got places to go and be myself – just walking the dogs here. I’m just thinking a, “*Hey! I live down the street. I like your mums*.” That’s it. But I’ll be darned if they don’t slide into the garage and push their garage door opener with their car only halfway in, so it shuts right behind them before they have to step out of their car. They haven’t even come to a complete stop and killed the engine yet. They would rather risk carbon-monoxide poisoning than have to potentially say hello to me. Okay. Got it. Not today. So, I just yell toward the garage – “*Nice mums!*” and keep walking my dogs. (*just kidding... maybe*).

In the age of small front porches, private backyard decks, and remote-controlled garage doors, you can nearly live your life fully undetected by those who even live on the same street.

And... I’m not trying to get you to *do* more religious activity. We’re talking spirit life. If, as followers of Jesus, we’re entrusted to be part of bringing more love and peace and justice into the world – then we’ve got to get out more.

In fact, the church, at its best, equips people to live out their faith *in the world*. For example, we’ve got a fired-up Broadway member whose faith and spirit are contagious. He loved our music series we did this summer and has started a small group at his workplace that is going back, watching each week’s sermon, and then meeting to discuss the GPS Guides – the *Grow. Pray. Study. Guides* we made to accompany each message. At work! That’s amazing. That’s being influence in the world, and you must get out there if you’re going to influence in any way.

We hope you come to worship to be filled – encouraged and challenged – to praise God because that’s the soul reset you need. We hope you get involved in study and service, too. But... in the end, we’re trying to supply you with spiritual confidence to be a presence in the spaces you move during the week. To be a different, positive, kind, just, grace-filled presence in your home and wherever you move about the world – that’s where the deepest impact is made. That’s where we are truly the church... not just when we are this space together. This means, we all must commit to getting out more, making at least an appearance in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and community spots we hang... if we’re going to be part of the healing and hope that the world so desperately needs.

Frederick Buechner, who has recently joined the resurrection, says, “*If we are to **love** our neighbors, before doing anything else, we must **see** our neighbors.*” Ready to make an appearance?

We draw a brief, but powerful, word from the book of Hebrews as our scriptural companion today. The book of Hebrews is a favorite of many even in its mystery. We don’t know who wrote it, or to whom specifically. Some toss it in with Paul’s letters and just say it was Paul, but most every scholar disagrees with that notion. It’s not written like Paul’s letters. In fact, some suggest the Greek Hebrews is written in is really “*good Greek*” as they say, insinuating that Paul’s writing wasn’t as clean, formal... not as “*good.*”

Some argue for Apollos as author – and he was an important leader in the church in that time, who gets some airtime. Some have said that the author is not named because Priscilla was a likely possibility given the cues and timing of the text, but... a woman was not allowed to teach. It was so important for the Church that they wanted it to make the biblical cut but would have to leave her name out in order to get it in there. Can you imagine what we’ve missed out on because we’ve silenced so many brilliant voices over time?

Other cues suggest this letter may have been sent to some students in Italy... likely Rome. Whatever the case, we know it to be a valuable word sent to Christians who had become “*too religious*” ... just drifting from the main thing – the main focus, cluttering the simplicity and getting concerned about details that were all outside concerns to the main concern of relationship and partnership in Jesus. Eugene Peterson described those to whom the letter was written as “*fussily religious, or anxiously religious.*”

If you’ve been a Christian for a long time, you can forget the passion of those early days of faith – when you didn’t have all the answers, but you were palpably focused on who Christ was in your life. There’s the so-called drift that can get the best of us.

In fact, I learned another new term this week when it comes to the struggle folks are having in the world these days. It's called "*Quiet Quitting*." This is happening in the workplace, in the Church, and in relationships, too. In the work setting, *Quiet Quitting* is what happens when someone can't afford to leave their job or is just putting in their time but has lost any passion to self-motivate or work on growing their effort. It's just getting by until you can quit for real. It's related to languishing we discussed last week, I suppose. Just a "*meh*" approach to life.

The Hebrew writer, shortly before our passage today, reminds the reader of the Hall of *Fame* – or Hall of *Faith* as it were – those ancestors who had the zeal and made the great impact as way of encouraging a refocus of passion and faith. Which leads to a word about the basics. First being? You need to get out more.

The famed text actually says, "*Show hospitality to strangers. Some have entertained angels and didn't even know.*" We're not talking an SNL alien abduction sketch here. The encouragement is that you never know who you may encounter and how such an encounter might change your life, theirs, the world... or all three. Have you ever had that experience?

One of my dear friends I met as a stranger on an airplane that he should have never been on in the first place. And I'm an introvert, remember! Many think I'm extroverted because I do things like preach and all, but that all takes a lot of energy for me. I'm a natural homebody who needs to get out more, so I try to do so.

I met another stranger via an appointed encounter neither of us imagined as anything more than a meeting pulled together with some others. I felt something was different and stretched my comfort to inquire further about that Spirit nudge. It opened a whole new door to life, ministry, and family.

Both of these experiences – was I entertaining angels? Perhaps. Maybe you call this strangers becoming friends. Regardless... none of it happens without a move of hospitality.

The Hebrew writer names hospitality as our primary calling as Christians. That's not always hosting events and serving brownies though those are great. It's having a spirit of hospitality – that is open to all and receives people along the way. In a world of indifference and increasing hostility, hospitality must be our intentional practice as people of faith.

You won't have to go as far as you think... at least not at first. Getting out more might lead you to your neighbor's front stoop, or the grocery store, or the coffee shop. It

might take you to an interfaith gathering or a city council meeting, or to the ball diamond where your child plays ball. You will undoubtedly find plenty of strangers who, from God's perspective, are meant to be your neighbors. Do you think that way? It's a mentality shift. What would it take for you to change your daily view of those around you from a hostile vantage point to a hospitable one? And you're saying, "*I don't have a hostile vantage point of others, pastor.*" Do others know that? How do they know?

Missourians watch more television a day on average than people in 40 other States. Top Ten! We did it!¹ The largest percentage of that time (*even when the Cardinals or Chiefs are playing*) is cable news.² Viewership of Cable News networks since the pandemic – Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC – grew by 61%, 72% and 28% respectively. I ask you this... is the goal of the cable news networks to keep you informed or persuade you... maybe even scare you... into a particular point of view? You don't have to answer out loud. If you buy into the persuasion take – is the general slant inviting you to understand an opposing viewpoint or is it to build your skepticism of the other... maybe even to create a spirit of outrage toward the other?

When you're out and about in the world – do you think people are more likely to look at you with a spirit of hostility or hospitality? And what do people think about your approach to them? Interesting.

In this same stretch of time, attendance and/or engagement in Christian churches around the country is down some 40 percent. The most watched cable news anchor, Tucker Carlson, of Fox News, is watched by 22,400,000 weekly; and Craig Groeschel, the most-watched Christian pastor every week in America, is viewed by 85,000 people weekly. That stat doesn't tell the whole story and there's lots of nuance, of course, but it's worth thinking about. Who is really discipling our society these days? Strangers are more likely to look at you through the lens of the cable news network they watch than any faith they subscribe to. Fellow Christians – we need to get out more if we want to be part of creating a more just and loving world. Are you up for making an appearance this week?

Peter Lovenheim, an English teacher, lives in a suburb outside of Rochester, New York. He was out walking his dog one day, surprised to see a TV news truck parked down the block. He was like, "*What is going on?*" Sadly, it was a horrible tragedy. A neighbor, just three doors down from Peter's home, had murdered his wife and then took his own life. Their kids, fortunately, escaped, and ran screaming into the night.

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2021-07-22/americans-spent-more-time-watching-television-during-covid-19-than-working>. Some other sites rank the States differently depending on which year in the pandemic we're looking at. In some polls, Missouri was lower on the list.

² <https://letter.ly/cable-news-viewership-statistics/> This was one of several sources that spoke to the rise in Cable News viewership. I pulled from several sites to utilize the stats found in the message.

Peter was shocked – not only by the violent deaths, but how little true community existed in their neighborhood. He didn't really know this family... they would wave at each other, but he had no sense that there was this kind of trouble brewing. It wasn't long before a "*For Sale*" sign was put up in their front yard, but the neighborhood just seemed the same as it always was. A family had vanished tragically, but it seemed to have very little impact on the neighborhood. "*How could this be?*" he thought? "*Did I live in a community or just in a house on a street surrounded by people whose lives were entirely separate?*"

This bugged him enough – for several months actually – that he decided to do something about it. He decided he would ask his neighbors if he could have sleepovers at their houses. You heard right. He began asking people in his neighborhood if he could spend the night and get to know them better. His daughter was horrified. "*That's so embarrassing, Dad!*" Can you imagine? Ultimately, about half of those he asked in the neighborhood agreed to his request. He learned so much and wrote down his experiences you can find in his book, "*In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time.*"³

The tenor of the neighborhood is different now... especially for Peter and these neighbors, who opened themselves to such a neighborly experiment.⁴ Anybody willing to try this in your own neighborhoods?

Today... I'm just asking you to make an appearance. Show up with loving kindness to a neighbor next door, or at the store, or at your workplace. Maybe you make a new friend. Maybe you invite them to worship with you next week. It might change their life. It might change yours. We need to get out more. Shoot me an email this week after you make some sort of appearance to a neighbor or stranger. I can't wait to hear! The best part? You may just entertain an angel without even knowing it.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH

³ peterlovenheim.com

⁴ As reported by Jennifer Howard in the *Washington Post* (April 18, 2010).