

Focus: Radical hospitality rearranges power. It doesn't just make room at the edges; it changes the shape of the circle itself. In God's kingdom, welcome is not about politeness or charity—it's about love that disrupts hierarchy, redistributes belonging, and redefines who "we" are.

Function: To confront our fear of outsiders and reveal it as a deeper fear of losing dominance—and then to inspire the community to examine its circles of belonging:

Who makes decisions? Whose stories define us? Whose presence could change us for the better?

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I. Opening

How many of you feel excitement at the thought of going to a social gathering with mostly strangers—people you don't know?

How many of you would much rather have a small gathering with close friends?

Now granted, some of it depends on the circumstance, right?

Sometimes I'm eager to meet new people...

and sometimes I try to remain as invisible as possible and wish I didn't have to interact with anyone I didn't want to.

As a kid, I was taught about *stranger danger*—never accept things from strangers, they might be out to kidnap me!

And yet, every friend in my life—every meaningful relationship—was once a stranger.

So how do we go from stranger to guest,

to becoming a friend,

to maybe even what we sometimes call *chosen family*?

That movement—from stranger to kin—is what the Kingdom of God is all about.

It's not a club we join; it's a community where everyone's belonging changes everyone else.

You can usually tell when you've crossed that line—when you've gone from stranger to family.

When you're a **stranger**, you're on your best behavior.

You knock. You take off your shoes. You wait to be told where to sit.

You try to remember names, but honestly, all you remember is where the bathroom was and which way the exit is.

When you're a **guest**, you start to relax a little.

You bring a dish to share—the safe kind, like brownies from a box, just in case it goes untouched.

You make small talk, compliment the host's décor, and tell yourself not to overstay your welcome.

When you're a **close friend**, you stop knocking.

You show up in sweatpants.

You open the fridge without asking.

You pour yourself a drink, grab a snack, and call out, “It’s me!” when you come through the door.

You’re comfortable enough to leave dishes in the sink—and to help wash them, too.

And when you’ve crossed all the way to **family**—

you drop by unannounced,

you can nap on the couch,

and you know where the extra toilet paper is.

They’ve seen you cry, you know each other’s faults, and you love each other still.

Now, churches have their own way of signaling who’s a visitor and who belongs, don’t they?

When you’re a **visitor**, you park in the back, clutch the bulletin like it’s a map, and spend half the service wondering if you’re standing at the right times.

You slip out during the last hymn so you don’t get trapped talking to people.

If you brave social hour, you hover near the cookie table—because cookies feel safe, and small talk does not.

When you’re a **regular**, you have your side to sit on.

People greet you by name.

You bring food to the potluck. You know which coffee pot actually works. Maybe you even get talked into a committee.

But when you really **belong**—when you’ve moved from guest to kin—your name is on the list for mowing the lawn or cleaning the church bathrooms.

After all, they’re not *their* bathrooms anymore; they’re *ours*.

When you really belong, you’ve got a voice.

You don’t just attend; you help shape what happens here.

People ask for your opinion and expect you to bring your gifts.

You’re not just welcome to come; you’re needed to help decide what we do next.

Belonging is also power—it’s who gets to move freely, who feels at home, and who’s still waiting to be invited in.

That’s what real hospitality looks like.

It’s not just making someone feel comfortable for an hour on Sunday—it’s creating space for their story, their voice, and their gifts to shape who we become together.

Because if new people come into the circle and nothing changes—
if everything looks the same as it did five or ten years ago—
then maybe we’ve offered friendliness, but not yet *radical hospitality*.

Radical hospitality rearranges power.

It doesn’t just say, “You can be here.”

It says, “You belong here—and your presence will change us.”

II. Naming the Fear

That's the scary part, though, isn't it?

We like the idea of hospitality—until we realize that truly welcoming others will change things.

The presence of new people always changes the group.

It shifts the rhythm, the inside jokes, even the power dynamics.

Every two years my mom's family gets together at Hilton Head—there are nine of us original cousins.

And over the years, when a new spouse or partner joins the cousin crew, there's always that little twinge of anxiety:

Will it still feel the same?

Will we still ride bikes at midnight and laugh till we cry?

Will it still be just as fun, just as safe, just as *us*?

We want to be welcoming, but we also want to protect what we love.

That's a good instinct—and it's also the root of our fear.

Every community—even church—draws circles.

Circles make us feel safe, known, familiar.

They tell us where we belong.

But every circle also creates an edge.

And those at the center have power—power to decide what's normal, who fits, and whether the edges move or stay right where they are.

And if we're honest, we don't just fear strangers.

We fear what their presence might change about *us*.

It's one thing to make room at the table.

It's another to hand over the menu and let someone else choose what's for dinner.

We feel that fear in church, but we also see it everywhere—in our country, in our politics, in our neighborhoods.

We hear it in the way people talk about strangers.

At its core, so much of that talk about “safety” and “invasion” is really about power—about who gets to define what *safe* and *normal* look like.

III. The Story of Ruth & Naomi

This tension — the fear of change, the risk of welcome — isn't new.

It's as old as Scripture itself.

Do you remember the story of Ruth and Naomi? Naomi - an Israelite, has a son who marries a foreigner - a Moabite. When the son dies, Ruth —refuses to leave her mother-in law Naomi, and becomes the foreigner - the stranger - the outsider in Judah. and says those words we've heard at weddings, at funerals, at covenant ceremonies for generations:

“Where you go, I will go.

Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.”

With those words, Ruth crosses every boundary that defined the ancient world —
ethnicity, religion, culture, geography, safety, expectation.

The one they called *foreign* becomes *family*.

The one with no power becomes the *bearer of promise*.

God’s redemptive work depends on the courage of the outsider—and the humility of the insider
to be changed by her presence.

The outsider, the one who had nothing becomes the one who carries the story forward.

Later, Ruth’s child — her son Obed — becomes the grandfather of King David.

Generations later, Jesus will be born from that same lineage.

So right there, at the very root of the gospel story, sits a Moabite woman —
someone the insiders never expected to be part of God’s plan.

That’s what radical hospitality looks like: not just making room for Ruth, but letting Ruth’s
presence change the story itself.

TODAY:

That fear of losing what’s familiar—it’s still alive today.

We see it playing out all around us.

Every generation of God's people has to decide what to do with the foreigner—the one who speaks differently, looks differently, worships differently, lives differently.

In Ruth's day, the fear was that Moabites were dangerous.

In our day, we hear the same story in new words: "invasion," "illegals," "protecting our borders."

We're told that newcomers will take our jobs, ruin our neighborhoods, bring drugs or crime.

But beneath that rhetoric lies something older and deeper—a fear about *power*.

The fear that the face of our country is changing.

That the table of belonging might look different.

That the story might no longer center the same people it always has.

And that's the real threat to empire—not crime or chaos, but *change*.

Because when people of color, immigrants, women, queer folk, and working-class communities start shaping the narrative,

the grip of white male control begins to loosen.

The story starts to look different.

Those who have always been at the center call it *danger*—because it threatens their story.

And here's where we have to be careful.

Because while it's easy to condemn the cruelty, it's also important to understand the fear underneath it.

Many people drawn to that rhetoric aren't driven by hatred alone. They're afraid—

afraid of losing a world they recognize,

afraid that their children won't have what they had,

afraid that the world is changing too fast.

That fear is real—and when it goes unacknowledged, it curdles into resentment.

But also that same fear lives in *us*, too.

We just dress it differently.

It is about those championing ICE kidnapping in the streets. But its also about other more subtle things as well. Sometimes we too can dissect systems of oppression without ever dismantling the ones we benefit from.

We may call out racism, but live in segregated neighborhoods.

We may serve the unhoused but don't want an affordable housing complex near our own homes.

We may not say it out loud, but we feel it when new people come and things start to change.

When the music sounds a little too different, when the leadership looks a little different, when the ideas stretch us in uncomfortable ways. Well that is a little too much change. I'm all for hospitality to newcomers, but not if it changes us TOO much.

We start to wonder, *Will it still feel like us? Will it still be safe? Will we still belong?*

Which is a natural and fair thing to ask. AND the Spirit keeps nudging us from awareness to transformation.

Because the gospel's movement is always outward.

And every time, the same thing happens:

God's love rearranges power.

The boundaries shift.

And we are invited to become a different kind of people—

not defined by fear,

but defined by grace.

PAUSE

So maybe the question for us isn't just about hospitality to the stranger,

but about how much change we're willing to let love bring.

Because welcoming the stranger doesn't just make our circle bigger—

it changes the shape of the circle itself.

The gospel never asks us to stay safe; it asks us to stay open.

Radical hospitality rearranges power—not to diminish anyone,

but to make room for the fullness of love.

Closing Prayer

May God widen our circles

until there are no edges left.

May God rearrange our power

until it looks like love.

And may God teach us

to recognize every stranger

as the face of Christ.

Amen.

God

we give thanks for the joys and celebrations lifted up this morning — for healing that is happening, for birthdays and new beginnings, for moments of laughter and beauty that remind us life is still good.

You are the One who keeps widening the world—
calling strangers into friendship,
outsiders into family,
and fearful hearts into love.

We confess that we like our circles just the way they are—
safe, familiar, predictable.
We draw lines to protect what we love,
but sometimes those lines become walls.
Forgive us for the ways we guard our comfort
more than we guard our neighbor's dignity.

For those who live at the edges—
the immigrant and the refugee,
the unhoused neighbor,
the person who wonders if they'd be welcome here—
we ask your protection, your peace, and your justice.
Let them find in us not just friendliness,
but kinship.

For our nation, torn between safety and compassion,
for our churches, caught between comfort and calling,
for our own hearts, tugged between fear and love—
send your Spirit to move us outward again.
Widen our circles
until there are no outsiders left.

Make us brave enough to be changed by one another,
and humble enough to see Christ
in every face that interrupts our certainty.