

Intentional Hospitality: A Lenten Discipline

By Charles K. Robertson

Each year at the beginning of Lent, we Christians hear the tale of Jesus' heroic self-control. During his temptations in the desert, and we heed the call to give up something or take something on as a sign of our own devotion to God. It is a time of self-discipline and intentionality, when we take nothing for granted, especially our own mortality, and rather make good use—the best use—of our time and resources.



One discipline that we can take on, that can have a profound impact on ourselves and those around us, is the practice of intentional hospitality. Now, this is far more than a smile or greeting when we meet someone new, only to return to whatever activity or conversation in which we were already engaged. No, intentional hospitality involves a strategic plan of action, biblically grounded and practically sound. It is all about a spiritual investment in the lives of others. Investing is not a foreign concept to most of us. Whether we have a lot of money or very little, we make short and long term investments. For those of us with children, we invest in their education. We even make an investment in our cars every time we get an oil change or a tune-up, knowing that we do so in order to help ensure the future well-being of the vehicle. How much more, then, should we invest in other people this Lent through a discipline of intentional hospitality.

And what does this look like? I would propose a “3/1 Plan,” meaning that we target three people to whom we will reach out with the love of God in very specific ways, and also that we take one person already involved in our church community, though still somewhat new, and begin to apprentice that person. There are scriptural precedents for what I suggest here. Jesus welcomed all and preached to thousands, he focused on a dozen, trained another seventy...and really invested his time and energy in three, Peter, James and John. And in the Acts of the Apostles, we see that Barnabas, that wonderful model of holistic stewardship, took one newcomer, Paul, under his wing, and apprenticed him until the day came when Paul actually surpassed Barnabas in leadership. One does not have to go far in the Hebrew Scriptures to see similar patterns in Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha.

How do we engage in a “3/1 Plan” ourselves this Lent? It is not difficult; it just means being intentional. First, consider three persons whom you know who are not actively involved in a faith community, and commit to praying for them throughout the forty days of Lent. Second, reach out to each one in a very specific way. Let one of them know that you are praying daily for her or him; I guarantee the person will be surprised, but also touched and a bit perplexed. Answer honestly if asked why: tell the person that you highly value her/him, and this Lent decided you cared enough that you wanted to pray every day for her/him.

For the second person, perhaps you could write a letter—an old-fashioned hand-written letter—in which you tell that person how much you give thanks to God for him/her, and why. If asked why you are doing this, again answer that this is Lent, and you could not think of a better time to express your deep appreciation for the person.

For the third individual, actively invite her/him to the Palm Sunday service or some other special service or event during Lent. Share your excitement about what your church does during Holy Week and what the various services mean. Tell the person that you would deeply appreciate having her/him as your special guest at one of those services, and then to have dinner or coffee afterwards to let you know what she/he thought about the experience. We are so afraid sometimes to ask that we might be surprised to learn that someone will actually feel honored to be asked!

As for the apprentice part of the “3/1 Plan,” find that one person in your congregation who you would like to see become more fully involved or engaged in leadership, and ask that person out for lunch or dinner at the beginning of Lent. Share with that person what gifts you see in him/her. Suggest meeting together once a week for five weeks and either exploring together a book of the Bible (like Philippians) or some devotional book. Not necessarily serious study—just good conversation over the book. Ask what kind of ministry intrigues him/her, and explore how you can help in moving forward with that. Be a Barnabas and help this “Paul” find a voice and mission in the church.

If all this sounds like real work, it is! But it is not overly difficult. It is all about relationships with three people and one person, and becoming a bit more intentional in those relationships during this season of intentionality. And, let’s face it, it might be more fun than just giving up chocolate!

The Rev. Canon C. K. Robertson, Ph.D. is Canon to the Presiding Bishop & Primate of The Episcopal Church, a former TENS Board member, and author of several books, including Transforming Stewardship and A Dangerous Dozen.