

“Secret Angels”

Hebrews 13:1-3

Series: Essentials for Frontline Workers

Week 3: Welcoming All People As Jesus Does

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Every church calls itself, “The Friendliest Church in Town.” I’ve never heard a church brag, “We’re the Rudest, Grumpiest Church in town.” And yet, time and again, visitors to church describe it as one of the most uncomfortable experiences. Years ago a visitor to Woodside faced every negative impression visitors have about churches. When he entered, there was no one to direct him where to take his children. When he walked into worship nobody smiled or spoke to him except the usher who handed him a bulletin. At the greeting time not one hand was extended in welcome. The pastor – namely me – preached on a topic which makes visitors cringe: money. It was stewardship Sunday. When I invited everyone to go to the Celebration brunch in Fellowship Hall, he went with his kids, got a plate for each, sat down and enjoyed a delicious meal which was wonderful except that nobody came up and said a word to him and his family. He left without anyone speaking to him.

Who was that visitor? Josh Bruns. Some of you will remember Josh wound up serving on staff here for several years as a seminary student and youth intern. Josh turned out to be a secret angel sent by God. Though we laughed about his first visit, it revealed we weren’t as friendly as we thought.

In our series Essentials for Frontline Workers we are learning it is essential for disciples of Jesus to Love God, Grow in Grace and Share with Others. We’ve discovered Loving God involves two actions: Worship and Prayer. We do these every day but it is important to ask ourselves: Am I worshiping weekly with other believers and praying daily? Now we come to the second Essential: Growing in Grace.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen (2 Peter 3:18).

If the first Essential is loving the Father, the second Essential is growing more like the Son. The point of being a disciple is to grow more like our Teacher Jesus. It’s a steep learning curve but that’s our purpose. This Essential also has two actions. The first part is Welcoming all people as Jesus did. He never turned anyone away. His words convicted and challenged people to change but He didn’t cut them off. He even included His betrayer. To grow more like Jesus, we must welcome and love all people as He did.

The first way to do this is to **Welcome All People In Here**. This weekend last year, was our last precovid worship service. With cancelled services, masks and social distance, it’s been especially hard to welcome newcomers to worship. With more vaccinations, we can look forward to worshiping as we once did. We need to prepare now for the secret angels God is sending us. At the end of the letter to the Hebrews it says,

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:1-2).

How can a church that feels warm and loving fail to welcome newcomers? It's right there in the passage. There are two instructions. 1) Keep on loving one another in the family of faith *and* 2) Do not forget to welcome newcomers to the family of faith. When members say, "Our church is so warm and friendly" they mean *to each other in the family*. They are good at the first instruction. Unfortunately, they forget the second – to offer love and friendship to guests. Both are important but the second is more essential. If you don't welcome newcomers into the family, after a while there won't be a family.

Why do some feel anxious about visiting a church? Imagine how you would feel if you visited a Mosque, a Hindu temple or a Synagogue for the first time. When do they meet? Where do you go when you enter the building? What do you wear? What do you say during the service? When do you sit, stand, kneel or bow? What are you allowed and not allowed to do? When I was 13 my friend celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. The service was almost entirely in Hebrew. All the gentile friends sat in the same pew. We stood and sat with the rest of the congregation without knowing why. At one moment, we were standing, when some Jewish boys our age said, "You guys can sit down now." So we did. And we were the only ones sitting. I think they played a practical joke on us.

For many, the thought of going to a church service is already uncomfortable. Covid makes this harder. How can we take away stress and make guests feel genuinely welcome? To roll out the red carpet we need to start rebuilding our excellent Welcome teams. With four services and four or five Sundays in a month that's twenty teams. I realize some of you are ready to return and welcome people while others need to wait a while. It will take time before everyone is comfortable serving again.

Serving on the Welcome Team is more important than preaching a sermon or leading worship. Why? A first time visitor to church will decide in the first 7 minutes whether to come back again. Usually they base their decision on how they are greeted, the cleanliness of the nursery and the women's bathroom. They call this the 7 minute window. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. So your warm smile and helpful kindness are far more influential than the service or sermon.

Greeting is highly essential and very simple. You don't need to train for hours or come to a weekly rehearsal, you don't have to do it every week. Show up a half hour before the service you choose, SMILE and say, "Welcome to Woodside." Minimal commitment, maximum impact. Some years ago a first time guest arrived just before the start of the service and the café was brewing a fresh pot of coffee. Behind the counter was Linda Marr – one of the friendliest people I know. She said, "Why don't you go into the service." He went in, found a seat, the service started. A few minutes later Linda brought a fresh cup of coffee right to his seat. He replied, "Thanks. I don't know if I'll like the sermon but I sure love the service here." Help us welcome God's Secret Angels.

Second, **Welcome All People Everywhere**. In Romans it says:

Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Romans 12:13-16

We need to do more than wait for people to come to this building. One thing Covid has taught us – if church only happens inside a building, it's not going to last. Jesus never intended for His Church to be just an event inside a building. We are to be a movement which brings His grace and salvation to the world. Yes Jesus spent time in synagogues but He did far more teaching and healing in neighborhoods and marketplaces, on hillsides and lakesides, on fishing boats and at dinner parties. Jesus didn't sit in a building and wait for people to come to Him. He took the blessing to them. Even preCovid, studies show fewer people feel the need to come to a Church service. Yet they also show they have deep spiritual questions and spiritual needs. One recent statistic says during Covid 25% of Gen Z (teens to age 24) have considered suicide. To grow more like Jesus we need to take His blessing outside the box to those who won't come to our building.

How do you practice hospitality and bring the blessing to your neighbors? **Let Go of Fear**. Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Many Christians fear how others will react if they start a spiritual discussion. They fear rejection, criticism, even cursing and persecution. It can happen. Yet people do have spiritual questions and needs. Recent research shows the #1 quality that helps spiritually curious Non-Christians open up and talk about faith is someone who listens without judgment. The quality they least like is a Christian who has all the answers or who launches into debate. So while we fear others will attack us, they are afraid we'll attack them. If you spend time and listen spiritual questions will always come up. When they do, don't give an answer, listen more.

As much as we all cursed the recent snow storms, they gave me the opportunity to see and talk with my neighbors. We helped each other shovel. I even met a new family on the corner. Take time to be friends, to show kindness, to listen. Not so you can make them members of Woodside – remember we are not focusing on membership – but so you can help them fall in love with Jesus and follow Him. You can also bless people in another neighborhood – social media. Please consider carefully what you post on these platforms. Over the last year I've seen a lot of attacks – sometimes between fellow believers. Does arguing on Facebook really change anyone's opinion? What does this show the world about Christians? Share the positive Good News. Share a sermon you found helpful. Bless instead of curse. And if someone curses your post, bless them back.

We also need to **Let Go of Ego**. Paul says, "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Scriptures says all are equal at the foot of the cross. None of us can think less of any other group. Here again I've heard prejudice coming from all sides and we need to stop. The one who gave up the

most and came down to our low position was Jesus and if we want to grow more like Him we need to let go of our egos and see all people as worthy of His love and salvation.

At Woodside we want to be a church that looks like heaven where every nation, tribe, people and language will gather before the throne of God (Revelation 7:9). This is why we are offering Building Community Partnerships on Wednesday, March 17 at 7 pm on Zoom. It's free and open to all. You will hear our own John Hughes, two local police chiefs and President of NAACP in Bucks County Karen Downer show us how to build bridges between all people. What happens when we open our hearts to all as Jesus did?

Ask Bud Finley. He was ten when Little Rock's Central High School was integrated. As Robert Lewis tells it

Bud would sit at the supper table and hear his father talk about the situation in language peppered with racial slurs. Growing up, Bud believed this prejudice was just the way things were – a kind of natural and unquestioned fact like cherries on a cherry tree. The “N” word was part of his vocabulary. Over time, Bud believed he had shed his racism or at least its ugly external carcass. Yet in his heart, he suspected this: he would no more associate with a black person than he would handle a snake.

Bud turned out to be a natural leader and a successful entrepreneur who made millions by getting in at the ground floor of the booming cellular industry. He had it all, whatever “it” was. But all that was about to change.

The turning came when his church, Fellowship Bible Church of Little Rock, did a project called Helping Hands much like our “Church Has Left the Building”. Bud was assigned to help an inner-city housing project named Eastgate. He figured he would rake a few leaves, tell a few jokes, pick up some trash and go home feeling good.

But then he met Michael, a sweet, seven year old African American boy.

Bud started telling Michael jokes, throwing fake punches like a boxer. When the day was over, Bud asked Michael if he could come visit him every once in a while. Michael agreed. Bud mentored Michael for the next three years. But it was Bud who was to learn the most. As he related to Michael as a person – not as a member of a needy class or a persecuted race the scales fell from his eyes.

Slowly, he began to understand firsthand what it is like to be young, black, and poor with little more than a ghost of a chance. He saw Michael's squalid apartment, where as many as eleven people lived at any one time. He befriended Michael's mother, who despite having children with three absent fathers, cared and nurtured her young ones with a deep love.

After spending three years with Michael, Bud came to a deeper understanding of the oppressive cycle of hopelessness and disconnected charity. In Michael's world, the future did not exist, and the past often had to be blocked out. In Michael's neighborhood, opportunity almost never came to knock.

Bud wanted to do more. He gathered the leaders of all the social services in Little Rock to encourage collaboration. He sold his consulting firm and used \$2 million to establish a foundation for urban ministry under the umbrella of his church. Eventually he left his job and became executive director of “Urban Strategies” which is developing

A network of social agencies, businesses and churches working together to provide an integrated web of services so that a child – from cradle until independence – could benefit from encouragement, assistance and tools. Through loving, one-on-one relationships, a child could expand his or her vision, and learn how to reach for new dreams. The end result: a tiny – but huge – break in the chain of despair.¹

All that started when a racist millionaire welcomed a tiny secret angel.

God is sending you His secret angels. Make sure to welcome them. You ask, “How will I know which are God’s angels?” Welcome everyone that way.

¹ Robert Lewis *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 142-150.