



Transformational Hospitality

Brian Mattson - 11/23/2025

We are here! The mad dash of the holiday season is officially on. This is the week of Thanksgiving, followed by multiple birthdays for people on my wife's side of the family. Then there's all the Christmas parties with friends and co-workers, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, my little Dorothy's 5th birthday, and then New Year's Eve and Day. Are you tired yet? I just went through the next six weeks of your life in two sentences, and I promise you, it will feel almost that fast. We are staring down the end of 2025. If you blink, you'll miss it.

This Thursday, many of us will sit around a table with our families and enjoy a feast. When I was growing up, we usually split this long holiday weekend between St. Louis and Columbia to see both sides of my family. We'd start in St. Louis with my mom's side before we trekked across I-70 to see my dad's side in Columbia at my grandma's house.

This was the only time each year we got to see my family from Wisconsin, so along with a big family Thanksgiving meal, we also exchanged Christmas presents. This served as the unofficial kick-off to the holiday season. But every kid in the 90s knew that the *real* unofficial kick-off to the Christmas season was when the toy catalogs arrived in the mailbox in early November.

We would spend hours circling every toy or game we wanted on our Christmas list. We hurriedly flipped through the women's clothing and housewares in the Dillard's and JC Penney catalogs to get to the toy section

near the back. But the Holy Grail of them all was the Toys “R” Us catalog. Nothing but pages and pages of toys, games, bikes, and more. Me and my siblings each used different colors to mark our specific selections. The items in these catalogs filled our Christmas lists and birthday lists for months to come.

When you’re a kid, some sort of running wish list was an important and valuable resource. The well-prepared among us were ready for holidays, graduations, and birthdays to disseminate the list to our friends and family. I remember excitedly making my invitation list for birthday parties in elementary school, just imagining the payload of presents I was about to receive. Because that’s a thing when you’re a kid: you invite more people to your party with the hope of more presents.

It’s not that we grow out of this habit as we age, we just rename the wish list a registry. A much more grown-up word. We invite people to our bridal showers, weddings, and baby showers and include information about our registries. *Please, celebrate with us and here are the things we’d like.* This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. The people we tend to invite to these special events *want* to give us gifts and provide the things that we think we need for certain stages of our lives. But it’s true; invitations to these events come with an expectation. It’s rare to get an invitation to something as an adult that doesn’t come with expectations. Perhaps it’s a fundraiser for a local nonprofit, or maybe you just weren’t paying attention at Bass Pro because your kids were trying to catch fish with their bare hands and accepted an invitation to a four hour timeshare presentation at Big Cedar. Who hasn’t done that, right?

Invitations cause us to feel the full gamut of emotions. We carelessly toss away invitations to real-estate showings we aren’t interested in. At the other end of the spectrum are those invitations we can’t say no to. It could be a wedding, baby shower, baptism, concert, or special ceremony.

Jesus famously handed out invitations to all sorts of people. Fishermen, rich men, the religious elite, and sinners. Some people heeded the invitations and embarked on a new way of living that changed their lives. Others declined the invitation to this new thing. We are going to look at a few of those invitations today, their similarities, and what we can learn about Transformational Hospitality.

At the beginning of Jesus's ministry, he starts forming his team. The first disciples invited are Simon Peter, James, and John. Three fishermen. Blue collar guys who made their living on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus invites them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat and once they do, the amount of fish requires help from another boat. Simon Peter, amazed at the haul, realizes something is different about Jesus and tells him, "Master, leave. I'm a sinner and can't handle this holiness. Leave me to myself." Jesus simply tells him not to fear—a common refrain from Jesus in the Gospels—but from now on he'd be fishing for men and women. And the three men left everything and followed him.

This invitation to the first disciples shows us one very clear thing about who Jesus is planning on associating with—sinners, in the words of Simon Peter. People who consider themselves outside of the religious circles or unworthy of special attention. The writer of Luke is hinting at who is to be included in this new kingdom.

Immediately after these invitations, Jesus performs a couple miracles. First, he cleanses a leper in one of the cities. This man had a skin disease, which relegated him to the fringes of society. He was deemed sick and unclean. Second, he heals a paralyzed man who was lowered down through the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching to the utter dismay of the scribes and Pharisees. In each of these instances, Jesus made these men clean, both physically and spiritually. The two miracles offer more hints as to who will be included in the ministry of Jesus—the sick, unclean, and oppressed.

Following those two healings, we come to the story of Jesus inviting Matthew, also known as Levi, to this new thing God is doing. This is how it sounds in The Message translation:

After this he went out and saw a man named Levi at his work collecting taxes. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” And he did—walked away from everything and went with him. Levi gave a large dinner at his home for Jesus. Everybody was there, tax men and other disreputable characters as guests at the dinner. The Pharisees and their religion scholars came to his disciples greatly offended. “What is he doing eating and drinking with misfits and ‘sinners’?”

Jesus heard about it and spoke up, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting outsiders, not insiders—an invitation to a changed life, changed inside and out.”

- Luke 5:27-32 MSG

If you’ve spent any time reading the gospels, you’ve probably figured out that every time you see the word Pharisees, or scribes, or Sadducees, they are most likely the villain. But in the Jewish society of Jesus’s time, the bad guys were the Romans and their co-conspirators. That was Levi. He would’ve been considered the worst of the worst. A Jewish man who got wealthy as a tax collector, serving the Roman empire and its governors at the expense of his own people. He was a traitor, despised and hated. Yet, here comes Jesus, flipping the script again. Even to the enemy, there is an open invitation to the Kingdom of God. This is our last hint about how radically inclusive this kingdom is.

The invitation isn’t just for the ones who are in-the-know. It’s for the ones who are pretty sure they don’t know anything. The fishermen and carpenters, the sick and the lonely, the wealthy and the wayward. In essence, this is the Gospel message at its heart: Jesus came to invite everyone—you

included!—to a changed life. That’s the good news. You don’t have to be the most righteous person, the smartest person, the most liked person. Just a person. I think that’s what these three vignettes, back-to-back-to-back, are trying to tell us.

In this world where the religious elite lived by strict laws, it was easy for everyone else to feel left out. The Jewish traditions and codes, passed down over generations, meant the religion had been reduced to a rulebook, sapped of joy and flavor. How fitting, then, that the juxtaposition between the grumpy religious insiders and the rest of the “sinners” was made clear at a meal. Not just a regular ho-hum meal. Another translation calls it a great banquet. The Kingdom of God is like a feast! And the beautiful thing is that everyone has a seat.

In the ancient world, a large dinner or banquet was one of the great joys of life. A chance to eat and drink and enjoy the company of friends and family. But for these Pharisees, Jesus was breaking the rules. He was mingling with sinners, tax collectors, and the unclean. There were very clear boundaries in the eyes of the Pharisees, and Jesus was crossing them all. This was not how to enjoy a dinner party in their understanding of the law.

A few chapters later, Jesus was invited to another dinner party, this time at the home of one of the prominent Pharisees and on the sabbath. The religious leaders kept a close eye on Jesus to see if he would break the rules again, but Jesus was also keeping tabs on them. Have they sensed that Jesus is ushering in a new way of life or are they stuck with their noses in the rulebooks? It turns out both things are true.

One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move. Right before him there was a man hugely swollen in his joints. So Jesus asked the religion scholars and Pharisees present, “Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath?”

Yes or no?" They were silent.

- Luke 14:1-4 MSG

Whoops. That's the wrong response. Jesus instead lets love and compassion lead and heals the man on the sabbath. Then he has more words for the Pharisees: "'Is there anyone here who, if a child or animal fell down a well, wouldn't rush to pull him out immediately, not asking whether or not it was the Sabbath?' They were stumped. There was nothing they could say to that."

It was a mic drop moment. Of course we should do good on the sabbath! Here was a man on the fringes of society with an obvious malady. This was a layup. A gimme. If only the Pharisees could get out of their own way. Doing good is always the right answer, but the Pharisees were blinded by their rules and regulations.

Last week, Brent talked about the importance of saying hello to the people who walk through our doors. He also mentioned this in his benediction, but there's a first step before you get a warm welcome. And that's an invitation. It doesn't have to be formulaic or in an embossed envelope. It can be casual and carefree. Joy-filled and spontaneous. Perhaps it should complement the relationship you already have with whomever you are speaking to. But if you are one of those people who need a script, I've got one for you.

"Man, I don't know. I've found this church. It's old. It's odd. It's noisy. Sometimes it feels like my grandma's church or the church I grew up in. Sometimes they have a choir type of thing. And they play a pipe organ sometimes. Most Sundays, though, it's music I don't hate. Oh, and it's definitely not boring. But the thing I like about it the most is that they talk about life, and Jesus, and faith with their words, but also their smiles. They describe a Jesus I kinda always suspected was out there, but didn't really quite know if he was real or just something I wished for once upon a time. That's mostly why I keep going back. Because the Jesus they talk about is the one who seems like he would invite me to a meal, and be okay with my loose ends. Maybe you should come sometime."

And if you aren't good with words, invite them with your actions. Send a call or a text. Get them a coffee. That's an invite all the same. And invitations are powerful things. However it happens, please hear me say that this is not some box you need to check because we want more people in these pews. I still have a bad taste in my mouth from hearing that in my teens and younger adult years. *Invite your friends! Who are you bringing with you to Life Group?* Because an invitation to experience the Kingdom of God is not well-manicured. It's authentic and organic because it means something to you, personally.

An invitation, specifically this invitation to God's banquet table, is three things.

1. It's a mark of humility. It's saying to someone else that you value their time, their presence, and their company. It's very deliberately saying that not everything is about me.
2. It's an adventure. No meal is ever the same. No conversation is the same. The Downtown Church, and God's table, is sometimes a hot mess. But that's okay. We aren't meant to be locked away in stodgy rooms. We are adventurers.
3. It's a form of giving with no expectations. We don't pull up more chairs to the table because we're hoping for more presents or gifts. We make room for more people and send out more invitations because we are living under a new law. The law of love. And we want others to experience it with us. We are constantly conscious of creating a space where Christ and the community intersect, and if we want to transform the world, we have to be transformed. And it starts with an invitation.

Maybe it's not to church. Maybe it's just getting together for coffee or dinner. Maybe it's catching up or volunteering for the same cause.

Now, an invitation might not change somebody's life instantly like Simon Peter or Matthew. But it sure could change their day. And in time, who

knows, maybe they'll start inviting people too. So I'm wondering, have you invited anyone to join you? You know they'll at least get a warm hello when they walk through those doors. We are ready for them. We've got a seat at this table. And even if it gets crowded, we'll gladly pull up more chairs.