

 **Education as
Hospitality**
Devotions



EDVANCE Annual Gathering 2021

The following devotions are provided by [Dr. David I. Smith](#), keynote speaker for the Edvance Annual Gathering 2021, for participants to engage with in preparation for the October conference.

Introduction

Much modern learning focuses on “covering” things, getting through them and checking them off. Yet “covering” can also mean “hiding.” Genuine depth of reflection and significant transformation depend heavily on repeated engagement. We do not read the Bible once and move on. We do not snatch the first passing thought from a verse and move on. We do not build our encounter with Scripture around speed and efficiency. We do not content ourselves with the surface. Not if we want to grow.

You work in education, with many demands on your time. Yet I am going to ask you to engage in some intentional repetition. As we prepare for October’s conference, I offer you a reflective exercise for each week based on brief passages of Scripture. They are focused on the conference theme and are intended to help ground us, so that we begin our reflections at the conference from a posture of engagement and increase our chances of growing in our calling.

I ask that you engage with each of these exercises three times during the week.

This means re-reading the same passages (intentionally, slowly) three times. Return to the same questions and think about them some more. Make further connection to your practice. Think about what you missed before. Each encounter need not take long – perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, though feel free to linger. Think of it as a small way to still the voice that calls for getting one more thing done, and instead to listen to God. Each reflection ends with a recommended daily practice that will take no more than a couple of minutes of your time.

Have no anxiety if deep insights do not hit at once, or at all. Read, reflect, listen; that is enough. Remember that you read Scripture as part of a community, and it is not up to you to see everything. Talk to colleagues about what they are seeing and hearing in the passages. Listen for what God might have to teach you through them, and for what you might be able to offer to the conversation. I am fully aware that many of the themes here raise thorny practical questions; conversation is a place to explore these. I will be praying for you as you focus together.

Week 1

Hospitality and Strangers

READ: Genesis 18: 1-15 and Leviticus 19:33-34.

There is a polite knock at your door one evening. The person on the doorstep does not share your ethnicity and does not seem to speak your language as a native. They appear to have been traveling. What are your conscious reactions? Your unconscious reactions? Where do strangers (foreigners, immigrants, aliens, people who do not belong to your tribe) fit in your imagination, in the world that you picture for yourself?

This week we read two passages that offer us two different kinds of starting points for the biblical call to hospitality. The early parts of Scripture give us stories that became paradigms to help us imagine how God works in the world, and they also condense these stories into laws that describe the community that follows God.

Abraham, the father of faith, encounters three strangers (Genesis 18) who approach his home, his vulnerable tent. How does he instinctively view them? What do his words and actions suggest about how he sees himself in relation to them? What does welcome, hospitality, look like in this story? Is it like or unlike the kinds of hospitality that you have experienced or offered? Do you know what comes next in this story, what status the strangers turn out to have?

Leviticus 19 contains one of the sentences that Jesus offered as a summary of the intent of the whole of the Law and the Prophets. Along with the command to love God, it is a command fundamental to Christianity. "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people," it says, "but love your neighbor as yourself." A few verses later, in the verses that you are reading this week, the passage clarifies that this is not only applicable to "anyone *among your people*." (Jesus made the same clarification when he debated this passage with a scribe in Luke 10, and again in Matthew 28 when talking of sheep and goats). "The *foreigner* residing among you must be treated as your native-born," it says. "Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt."

Here, then, are two commands to love someone as yourself. The neighbor and the foreigner/stranger/immigrant/alien (the word here simply refers to someone not from your community). These commands echo Abraham, the father of faith, welcoming strangers.

A new student joins your school, your class. They do not share your ethnicity and do not seem to speak your language as a native. They may create challenges for you, for your community. What are your conscious reactions? Your unconscious reactions? Where do strangers (foreigners, immigrants, aliens, people who do not belong to your tribe) fit in your imagination, in the educational world that you picture for yourself?

Recommended practice this week:

Think of a person in your school community or your residential community who is in some significant way a stranger to you. Perhaps someone who makes you uncomfortable. Once each day this week, give thanks for their life. Pray for them to experience blessing.

Week 2

Hospitality and Divine Welcome

READ: Isaiah 25:6-8 and Luke 4:16-21

“Our God is a....”

Pause for a moment and fill in the blank. What are the first half dozen images that come to your mind. Shepherd? King? Father? Consuming fire? What else?

How quickly might “banquet host” appear on your list? If your church experience is like mine, I suspect it is perhaps not quite as close to the tip of your tongue as some of the other images I just mentioned. If it is, I am glad. It is a significant theme in Scripture, where God repeatedly invites us to eat and drink, where the consummation of history is a marriage banquet, where Jesus repeatedly breaks bread with the crowds, with the disciples, and is recognized in the breaking of bread on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection.

As Abraham’s story suggested, hospitality was an important value in the ancient world, as it is in many parts of the world today. It is less to the fore in the West, where we focus a great deal on the private space and possessions that we can secure for ourselves. Perhaps that makes us less quick to meditate on the recurring imagery of God as host.

In Isaiah 25 God hosts a banquet. Who is invited? How will the guests be treated? How does this banquet move beyond provision for material needs to deeper needs and hopes? Is it helpful to read this alongside the story of Abraham in his tent from last week?

The connection to Luke 4 seems more elusive. What does this passage have to do with hosts and banquets and strangers? Here Jesus reads aloud from the prophet Isaiah, using the passage to declare the shape of his ministry, to sketch the direction God’s next dealings with humanity. The last line quoted is usually translated “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” As Joshua Jipp points out in his recent book on hospitality in Scripture, it is equally valid to translate it as “the year of the Lord’s welcome. He suggests that this passage “invites the reader to pay attention to the way in which the entirety of Jesus’s ministry and particularly his meals with strangers enact divine hospitality to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.” (*Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, p.21)

Start from the image of God as banquet host, of Jesus as the one declaring the arrival of God’s hospitality, God’s welcome. How might this shape the way you imagine what makes your school or your classroom or your curriculum Christian (Christ-following)?

Recommended practice this week:

As you move through your school this week, consciously pay attention to the different people who share the space with you. Students (successful ones, struggling ones, those central or marginal to the school's culture), staff (administrative, custodial), colleagues, parents. At least once a day, choose a person and reflect on how they might experience God's welcome in your school.

Week 3

Hospitality and Status

READ: Luke 14:7-24 and Luke 15:1

Try doing an image search online with “hospitality” as your search term. What do you notice about who is (and is not) in the pictures? About the surroundings?

In the modern West the word “hospitality” is commonly associated with corporate venues and the tourism industry, creating an emphasis on gleaming surfaces and relatively wealthy travelers. Even when hospitality is connected with more personal spaces, it easily becomes associated with display and status, with the carefully prepared home that shows our guests how well we are doing, and with the hope that we are making good connections.

These temptations have been a theme in the church’s discussion of hospitality ever since the beginning. Hospitality can be used to network with the wealthy and powerful, to secure our own status in the world by making a good impression. Hospitality can be used as a channel for pride, showing off our prosperity and good taste. Hospitality can be used to reassure ourselves of our own superiority, displayed in our admirable generosity to those who get to taste our provision.

Church leaders in every age have pushed back on these versions of hospitality. They repeatedly reminded their readers and hearers that in the Bible the stranger regularly turns out to be God or an angel, that the value of others rests in the image of God, not in their social status or ethnicity, that Jesus ate with sinners and the poor and despised and it was the Pharisees who wanted it otherwise. As you think about those you might welcome, John Calvin advises, you might “say, “He is contemptible and worthless”; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image.” (Institutes 3.7.6)

This week’s passages directly address the difficult relationship between hospitality and status. They name the perennial temptation to make generosity an affirmation of our own honor and a display of our own magnanimity. They remind us who Jesus saw as prime targets of the “year of the Lord’s welcome.” They point to the friction that Jesus’ notion of hospitality generated. If God, as Isaiah showed us, is a banquet host, and Jesus reveals to us what God is like, what kind of host is God, and what kind of hospitality flows from him?

And how are we called to imitate God, even in his hospitality? Even in our schools?

Will it resemble the Google images? Or another image?

Recommended practice this week:

Identify a student in your school community who seems least likely to be experiencing school as a place of God's welcome. Commit to praying for them briefly each day this week. As you do so, make a note of any thoughts that arise about concrete changes that might make a difference.