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WELCOME!

8/ 29 / 2016

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. - Hebrews 13:2

For many of us, this season begins a new year - a new school year, a new program year at church, a new season in the creation. With all of these changes come new people, new schedules, new rhythms of daily life, new opportunities to welcome others into our world. But for some, "new" brings with it anxiety: Will I be welcomed? Will I fit in? Will I have friends? Will I do well?

This season also brings with it new opportunities for welcoming all those who are made anxious by what is new, providing support and encouragement to them. We can prepare those in our home and in our congregation to welcome them, to smooth the transition, to be hospitable to all of those God has placed on our path.

It is important to remember times in our lives, when we were the "stranger." For me, three distinct experiences come to mind:

* My family moved from one neighborhood and school to another when I was in kindergarten. My thoughtful teacher assigned me a "walking buddy," Maggie Johnson, who walked me home my first day of school and picked me up the following day, showing me how to cross with the crossings guards, and giving me the confidence to do it. To this day, she remains a dear friend. What a gift!

* Before my junior year in high school, my family moved from Minnesota to Missouri and I started a new school, knowing no one. There was no assigned "walking buddy" this time and I was terrified. First hour, in gym, we had to choose the sports we wanted to play during the first semester. A girl approached me and said, "You're new, aren't you? Why don't you sign up for the same ones I'm signing up for and we'll be together?" A guardian angel named Gayle Gulick! She reappeared in the cafeteria doorway, just when I had just decided to hide, rather than risk rejection over sitting at lunch table where I wasn't welcome. She called to me, and said, "Get your lunch. I've saved you a seat at my table." Rescued!

* Fast forward a decade. Les I had moved back to Minnesota and decided to visit a large Lutheran church. I'd never been to one before. I found the size of the parking lot daunting. I didn't know the liturgy or where to take our children. Just inside the door, I was looking as overwhelmed as I felt. A smiling face appeared, proclaiming, "You must be new! Let me help you find Sunday school for your three-year old and the nursery for your baby." We knew we'd come home ... and, indeed, we had. Forty-one years later, Joyce Pedersen is still one of our closest friends and a cherished member of our faith family!

This is the perfect time of year to think about how we will equip our family and congregation to "welcome the stranger." What do you already do that is hospitable? What one new thing might you want to add this season. Remember, by showing hospitality, you may entertain angels without knowing it!

FOR OUR CONGREGATIONS

Take a look at everything through the eyes of the stranger:

- * Is the parking lot well marked? Do you have volunteers directing traffic, calling out a greeting, and smiling at all who come?
- * Is the website current, informative, and easy to navigate?
- * Is the building well signed, with clear directions for those who don't know where things are or how to get there? Is it handicap accessible? Is it welcoming to parents with little ones, who need a changing table?
- * Are there extra greeters, identified as those who can help you find what you are looking for, register children and adults for faith formation opportunities? Do they have extra print copies of the newsletter or upcoming events? Do they smile and engage everyone?
- * Consider name tags, so that you can call people by name and they have a prompt to remember your name. Deputize everyone to be greeters and to engage all who come.
- * Is there hospitality - you know, coffee, lemonade, and cookies - available and are there ministry volunteers to introduce new attendees to members and to help your visitors meet new friends?
- * How about follow up with visitors? Be in touch during the week and let them know you hope to see them again.
- * Are teachers well prepared to teach and there early to greet kids, youth, and adults, to be fully present with all who come? Make sure they let all who come know how much it means that they are there.
- * Give everyone of every age opportunities to worship, to learn, to serve, and to build relationships. These were the four building blocks that made me feel I really belonged to my congregation. They keep me engaged and committed and in love with my faith family!

FOR FAMILIES

This is a perfect season to remind your kids how important it is to welcome new kids, to include everyone, and to stand up for kids who are excluded or bullied.

* Before kids go off to school, remind them to look for the kids who are new, the ones who don't have friends or playmates. Encourage them to introduce themselves, to introduce new kids to their friends, to include them, to make room at the lunch table, to play with them on recess or in gym. Role play with your kids how to do this.

* Make your home a place of hospitality. Welcome their new friends into your home. Delay judgment about these kids and really get to know them, to learn their stories. Offer rides. Be an interested and engaged adult.

* Catch your kids being those who include others. Affirm, affirm, affirm. Remind them that "the popular group" isn't always kind or loyal or inclusive.

* Help your kids look for enduring qualities in their friends, regardless of clothes, address, background, athletic prowess, or academic accomplishment. Applaud them for good choices and for being loyal to their friends. Challenge behaviors or values that concern you.

* When they see bullying, tell your kids to stand up for the victim, to enlist the help of adults, and to never participate in or be a bystander to bullying. Help them learn to be witnesses, to put an end to this insidious practice. Jesus said, "Now, you will be my witnesses." Our behavior testifies to the love of the One who came so that we would never be alone or marginalized ... or let anyone else experience that either.

* It takes courage to befriend the ones who are left out. Remind your kids that courage is never doing the things that are easy. It is facing your fear and doing it anyway! Pray for all of the kids whose lives will be made better by the presence of your kids. Pray, thanking God for your kids, who have the values and courage to welcome the stranger.

Links to learn more!

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This is the perfect opportunity to call or email Marilyn

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