

[I'll try to find a pic] One of the strangest experiences of my life was how freaked out I got when my friend Thomas and I went to Cairo. I wasn't scared for my safety or anything. It was just the Middle Eastern culture of Egypt was so different from my nice, neat American life. Cairo is packed. It's loud. It stinks. And the people there have nothing like the sense of personal space we have here.

While we were there, Thomas and I stayed at a French Institute run by Dominican priests. After our first day out in the press of Cairo - we went to a bazaar and a museum, we returned to the school for the evening. The school is behind this giant wall, and when we passed through the gates, I had a reaction I wasn't prepared for. All of a sudden, as soon as we got inside the gates, to the calm, quiet green of the carefully maintained European-style grounds, I felt a sense of relief so strong that I nearly collapsed to the ground. I felt like I had been holding my breath all day, like I had been drowning in the city of Cairo and suddenly I could come up for air.

[Map 1: world vs. safety] This was not a good moment for me. I like to fancy myself well-traveled and open-minded, especially when it comes to other cultures. But in that moment inside the walls of the school, I realized I had some deeply-seated xenophobia, something so primal it lived beneath my reason, down in the depths of my spirit. I learned on that trip why European colonists built these elaborate estates with walled in yards - it was to keep the world out, to create a little haven that felt like home.

That experience has haunted me (obviously) since that trip - which was nearly 5 years ago. In the years since, as I've reflected on it, I've gained a new appreciation for home, and also a deep suspicion that home may have been what formed me to react as I did. I'm sure many of you haven't had that kind of extreme reaction to travel, but we all know the feeling of coming home after a long day or a long trip... it feels really good.

[Map: home vs. world] There's a feeling of crossing a threshold, a border, between us and the world. Home is where we feel safe, secure, comfortable to be ourselves in our own space. We can put away the various roles we have to play in the world, the worries and concerns we have. We're safe.

There was a time in the not too distant past where our world wasn't divided so sharply between "my space" and "out there", where the lines weren't as clearly defined. There was a cultural institution that bridged those two spaces, an institution that's all but vanished.

[Image] It was called the front porch, and we miss it desperately whether we realize it or not.

The front porch made its appearance in the 1800s, but really rose to prominence in the early 1900s, when most homes began to feature them. Families spent evenings on the porch, enjoying a cool breeze after dinner, and with so many people simply *being* outside together, neighborhoods developed a strong sense of community. The front porch turned out to be a sort of overlap between the public spaces of the world and the private spaces of the home. You were in public, but you were home too. You were at home, but you were still out in public too.

Front porches blurred the line between the world and the home. By their very nature, they created a sense of connectedness among people. Front porches *break down* the walls between us, make us more comfortable in the world.

We don't have front porches anymore - they began disappearing in the 1950s and today we've mostly retreated back into our homes. We've lost the common space the front porches gave us, and with it we've lost our sense of community, of connectedness.

We need these common spaces, these borderlands where the lines between us and them get blurred. These spaces are the very spaces God calls us to inhabit. If we are to be a people of God, if we are to act as agents of God's healing and reconciliation in the world, we must seek out these spaces. God calls us to an active, insistent hospitality that requires effort on our parts. We don't have front porches anymore, so we're going to have to create them.

I don't mean we're going to begin a massive remodeling project to put front porches on all our houses (though that would be awesome!). I mean rather that we must be creative about finding new borderlands in our culture. Front porches aren't magical - the presence of one doesn't automatically make someone more hospitable or open to others. Rather, front porches encouraged practices that formed us to be more community-minded, more open to people who weren't part of our family.

[The circles are separated into Us (home) and Them (public/outside)] *That's* what we've lost with our front porches. It's no coincidence we're also more skeptical of outsiders and less likely to trust strangers. We have lost the institutions that blur the boundaries between me and you, between family and stranger. Without the front porch to blur those lines, we're left in a world of us and them. Democrat and Republican. American and Outsider. Christian and pagan. Black and White and everything else. Gay and Straight and everything else.

That's a lot to put on the front porch, but this is the power of institutions. Institutions shape us by encouraging certain habits and behaviors and discouraging others. Cultural institutions form us at such a deep level we are often unaware of the beliefs and behaviors we have learned - much like I was in Egypt. That makes these sinful beliefs and behaviors difficult to discover and even more challenging to overcome.

This is the season of Lent, when as a Church we examine our lives, confess sin and turn to God for forgiveness and healing. This year, our series is called System Failure because we're exploring Sin not only as individual bad behaviors, but as patterns of behavior, habits taught to us by institutions in our culture. We face these often surprising ways we've been formed and we look to God to save us. We find in the Church a counter-institution, offering us counter behaviors and practices that heal us and form us into the people of God.

[Illustrate: we moved inside/backyard] So what replaced the front porch? Front porches started to disappear as cars became more affordable - the noise and exhaust chased people inside.

Then the TV made its way into our homes, giving people something to watch *inside*, and air conditioning quenched our longing for those cool summer breezes. Instead of elaborate front porches, open to the world, blurring the lines between us and them, we have elaborate backyards, protected behind high privacy fences. We have family rooms organized around giant televisions, allowing us one-way access to the world. This new institution of inhospitality is played out in suburban living rooms and backyards.

This new institution is difficult to discern because it's passive. To be hospitable, to be welcoming, to blur the boundaries between us and them takes effort, intention. But we can be inhospitable without being cruel. We can simply go about our business, ignoring the world around us, allowing the lines between us and them to sharpen, become more defined.

Inhospitality is dangerous because it's passive - there's not even a word for it. You can be hospitable or... INhospitable. Welcoming or UNwelcoming.

And yet from the beginning, God's people have been formed not to be passive, simply to exist in the world around us, one more us in a sea of them. Again and again, God has called us to be a people of radical hospitality, a people who risks the safety of us for the good of them, an open people, not a closed people.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 55. Of course, Israel didn't live in turn-of-the-century ranch style homes, so they didn't have front porches. But in the ancient world, hospitality was still a big deal - repeatedly in the Scriptures, God reminds Israel that how they treat strangers is a reflection of how they really feel about God.

This is especially challenging for the original audience of this passage. It dates from when Israel was in Exile. Their repeated unfaithfulness to God had resulted in devastation - the Babylonian Empire crushed them, gutting their culture and deporting the majority of their political, religious and social leaders to Babylon.

Put yourself in their sandals. They're living in a foreign country, having been forcibly relocated there. They're surrounded by *Them*, but a culture that doesn't make sense to them, that believes the wrong things, that has weird customs and strange behaviors.

I don't know about you, but I know *exactly* how I would react in that situation because it's what happened to me in Egypt. I'd be afraid. I'd want to turn inward, to hide inside my walls with US, keeping THEM safely outside.

So let's listen to God's words to God's people from the prophet Isaiah. Let's listen in:

“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink— even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk— it’s all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food.

This sounds great to us, but to the original audience it would've sounded *off*. We don't catch it because we don't live in the world of Israel, but for an ancient listener it would've been *very* strange. Ancient people mainly practiced hospitality at meals in homes. They invited guests to feast with them. Offering your guest food and drink was their version of the front porch.

That's what God is offering here, but the setting isn't at a table. The prophet's words are the words of a merchant in a bazaar. [Picture of a bazaar vs. table venn] For Isaiah's listeners, the form is familiar - the bazaar. The content is strange, however. No one at a bazaar gives away what they're selling. Giving food happens at a table, in your home. Selling happens in public, at the bazaar.

But God is dragging the table into the bazaar, offering for free what should be sold. God is treating the public space as a chance for private welcome. God is transforming the public space into a site of hospitality, welcoming everyone who can hear, not just a few select guests. What is God offering?

"Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David. See how I used him to display my power among the peoples. I made him a leader among the nations. You also will command nations you do not know, and peoples unknown to you will come running to obey, because I, the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, have made you glorious."

Seek the Lord while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the Lord that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously.

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

"The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry. It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it. You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands!" -- Isaiah 55:1-12

This is good news for Israel, obviously. To promise those living in Exile that their God has not abandoned them, that even though their kingdom has been destroyed, God is not done fulfilling promises made long ago is music to their ears.

But God is also calling them to repent, to return to God, and in this regard God's words are challenging to Israel. God is modeling for Israel a radical hospitality that's grounded not in fear

of THEM but in trust of God. That God is who God claims to be - the lord of all creation. That God will do what God has promised to do - bless the whole world through Israel.

Israel has failed repeatedly to be this people - faithful to God and open to the world. It has brought them to this place of broken dreams, failed hopes, the reality of being a conquered people. And now, God is promising them restoration. God is offering them a radical welcome - food and drink without cost so that they may become again the people God has always been calling them to be.

To conquered Israel this sounds impossible, but God promises they are not finished. God's ways are not our ways. God's imagination is bigger and grander and better than ours. God has spoken, and the same voice that shaped the world now shapes human history - as relentless and surprising as ever.

God is inviting Israel back to their true selves, to reclaim the identity they've repeatedly rejected. This vision God sets before us challenges us be a hospitable people, to imitate God as the seller in the bazaar, offering life and hope freely.

Friends, to be God's people is to trust God is working in the world. To be God's people is to imitate this God, and that means we cannot hide, passively resisting the call to build community safe behind our walls.

When Israel was deep in the heart of Babylon, God called them to remember they are the light of the world. They are the people whose lives call the nations to come to God.

A people of God is a people who values community, who goes out of our way to connect with people who are not like us, who imitates God's call to the world by being *in* the world, not hidden away.

[Pic of the town, maybe of Trocme?] We can be a people of God like the people of God in Le Chambon, France. After France fell to Germany in World War Two, France became very dangerous for the Jewish people. And most French persons refused to help the Jews out of fear for what the Nazis or the sympathetic Vichy government would do if they were caught.

Not the citizens of Le Chambon. Under the leadership of a local pastor named Andre Trocme, the town hid hundreds - possibly thousands - of Jews from Nazi patrols over the course of the war. Citizens of the town welcomed Jews into their homes and hid them at the risk of their own lives, all at a time when the vast majority of their compatriots refused to risk anything. For most of them, the Jews were Them and they couldn't risk themselves or their families to help.

What made the citizens of Le Chambon different? As you can imagine, much has been made of this town (and rightly so). But the citizens of Le Chambon repeatedly and steadfastly refused to acknowledge they had done anything different. Author Philip Hallie, who wrote a book dedicated to exploring the miracle of Le Chambon, has a powerful conclusion:

He observes that long before any Jewish people ever came to Le Chambon looking for shelter, the people of the town had practiced hospitality. They were a people of open doors, a people who greeted any stranger with "Come in, come in." In worship, Pastor Trocme was known to preach the radical hospitality of God, to call the citizens of Le Chambon to imitate this God.

The citizens of Le Chambon made it a point to be a hospitable people. They went out of their way to welcome strangers, to speak of God as the one who welcomes strangers. And so, when strangers showed up at their doors, looking for salvation, the citizens of Le Chambon said what they always said, "Come in, come in."

In the ancient bazaar, God calls out, "Come all who are thirsty and buy milk with no money! Come all who are hungry and buy food at no cost!" God blurred the line between stranger and friend by offering for free what people were used to paying for. God turned a transaction into a gift of welcome.

In occupied France, the citizens of Le Chambon open their doors and say, "Come in, come in." They blurred the line between us and them by choosing to welcome the stranger.

What about us, Catalyst? We don't have bazaars. We don't live in a world of front porches anymore (though they're becoming trendy again in new architecture). If we want to be a hospitable people, we must seek out ways to blur the line between insiders and outsiders. You know who's great at this? Starbucks. Their CEO Howard Schulz calls Starbucks "third spaces". First space is the home. Second space is public - your job. He wants a Starbucks to be a post-modern front porch, where people feel at home even though it's a public space.

Friends to be the people of God, we must learn to create third spaces. This worship gathering can be that third space if we let it. We don't have to - we can run in and run out, refusing to talk to anyone, avoiding everyone while getting our spiritual quick fix. Or we can choose to show up a little early, plan on staying a little late. Our C-Groups are designed to function as third spaces, meeting in homes to blur the line between me and you, us and them. In a C-Group, you're practicing friendship with people who don't see the world the way you do, but who have the same faith you do. C-Groups can function as a front porch for you.

But what about the breakroom at work? The mom group you're part of? The bleachers at your kids' sports games? The writers' group or game night? Friends we can see the fall of the front porch as a curse or an opportunity. With no front porches, we are free to look for community anywhere and everywhere. We are free to become agents of God's welcome and hospitality, choosing to blur the lines between us and them, between strangers and friends.

Let Catalyst be like the people of Le Chambon. Let us be a people of open doors. Let us be a people always ready to say, Come in, come in. Let us be a people who blurs the lines between us and them, that all who encounter us might discover they are loved and welcomed.

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