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HOSPITALITY

When we sit at our tables, we're not just an aggregate of individual family members eating and drinking to stay alive; we're a congregation of communing souls hungering and thirsting to experience the goodness and beauty of the life God has designed just for us.

SALLY CLARKSON

Like any host excited to swing the doors wide to others, God took great care when He created the Garden. He prepared. He arranged. He readied. Thinking not just of the needs but also of the unspoken and the not-yet-imagined wants of those who would live there, He made a home. And it was good. Not one item was out of place or unaccounted for. From the swirling currents of the deep stirred by the raging wind, to the tiniest blades of grass silently pushing their way up through a soft cushion of fresh earth—His love was in every detail. When the time was right, and when everything was ready, He invited others.

For Adam and Eve, Eden was not a home of their making. They were guests. But they cracked open the elaborate, garden-sized welcome basket of fruit and began to settle in. Hospitality began here—in the bushes. Home was good, but it was made *very* good simply because they were there (Gen. 1:31). It was a place where they could be seen and known and loved.

THE HOSPITALITY OF JESUS

Even after the fall and the displacement outside the Garden, the practice of hospitality remained. The descendants of those first two guests were charged to continue the open-door policy God demonstrated in that original home. Hospitality was not just a suggestion—a thing to do whenever they felt up to it—it was a command, given by God as a way to ensure that every outsider was welcomed. Leviticus 19:34 reads, “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” In the same way that God had welcomed them—taken them as strangers in Egypt and given them a home—the children of Israel were to do that for others. The *love* mentioned here is *’āhab* in Hebrew. It is the same kind of love Scripture uses to describe the love a father has for his son and more remarkably, the love that God the Father has for humanity.¹

Later in Deuteronomy 14:28–29, the Israelites were given more specific parameters for how to carry out this love, “At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may

bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.” The plight of widows, orphans, and sojourners (foreigners or strangers, as some translations suggest) was bleak in ancient cultures. They lacked the familial or tribal status to provide for and protect themselves. This law was God’s way of directly providing for the physical needs of the marginalized. In a broader sense, it foreshadowed the provision He would later extend to us, the church—foreigners of the faith, alienated from God.

Hospitality wasn’t just important to the Israelites; it was a legal obligation. In accordance with the Talmud, *hakhnasat orchim* or the “bringing in of strangers” compelled Abraham to keep all four sides of his tent open in order that he would never miss a chance to invite others to his table.² It prompted Jethro to chastise his daughters for not inviting Moses in for refreshment. It encouraged the impoverished widow of Zarephath to provide a meal for Elijah even though her larder was empty. The law ensured that everyone was seen, known, and loved.

While the mandate of hospitality was written in ink, the blueprint for how best to welcome the stranger was sketched lightly in pencil. For the most part, God left the specifics up to the people. His only universal demand involved the same kind of hospitality He showed to His Garden guests: food. *Feed the stranger* was God’s clear charge.

God called the Israelites to use the very thing that broke the relationship between Him and humanity in that first home—a bite of food—to help restore it. Food would reveal His *’āhab*, His love, to the rest of the world. To share a meal with someone was to share life with them. It was a gesture of intimacy. It helped create a bond of unity between strangers in a way no other physical act could replicate.

As a Jew, Jesus would have been both giver and receiver of this same Levitical hospitality. The Son of Man came eating and drinking and invited others to do the same (Luke 7:34). All throughout

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the Gospels, we see Jesus building fellowship around a meal. At the table, He celebrated two becoming one, multiplied the faith and obedience of a small boy, extended friendship to the forgotten and the outcast, ushered in His greatest sacrifice, restored and promoted a three-time de-tractor, and comforted two weary travelers on their way home from witnessing the largest loss.³

Jesus bookended His ministry here on earth with meals, perhaps because He knew discipleship happens around a table. Vulnerability happens around a table. Accountability happens around a table. The table held so much potential that at one point when an offer of hospitality was not extended by a host, Jesus invited Himself. “And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today”” (Luke 19:5). As the Bread of Life, Jesus knew that inviting someone to the table was never just about eating. It was always about nourishment. It was always about life—something Zacchaeus desperately needed, something we all desperately need.

In the final evening before His death, Jesus chose the familiarity of a Jewish feast to establish a new holy ordinance. His body would be broken. His blood would be poured out. The bread and the wine became tangible reminders of the communion the disciples would

have with Christ and of the communion they'd eventually share with the whole congregation of believers that would come after Christ's death, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. That includes you and me (Matt. 5:6). The Lord's Table made us one in our need and freed us from the bondage of our sinful appetites.

Sometime later, when tasking Peter to build the church, the risen Jesus did not present a mission statement, a branding plan, or a five-point action initiative. He simply said, "Feed my sheep." In our modern attempt to dissect the seaside fish fry of John 21, we're often compelled to create a complicated formula for how Peter may have launched a "start-up" church from the ground level. "Preach to my sheep," "Equip my sheep," or even "Lead my sheep," never left Christ's lips. *Feed* was His rallying cry. Serve up generous portions of my 'āhah to a world starving for "food that endures to eternal life" (John 6:27).

HYGGE HOSPITALITY

The Danish people know the power of hospitable living. Like Jesus, they've found practical ways to help people feel seen and known and loved. So much so that, unlike in America, where three out of five people confess to feeling lonely, Denmark boasts a surprisingly low rate of isolation and loneliness—only 3 percent according to the European Commission's most recent findings.⁴ While that small figure can't all be credited to *hygge*, one could argue that the hospitality found at the very center of a *hyggelig* lifestyle prevents, or at least lessens, feelings of loneliness.

Strangers become friends around the table. That is why to the Danish people breaking bread together is one of the most *hyggelige* activities there is. Preferring to dine in rather than eat out, they don't just serve food at their tables, Danes serve meals. While

every Danish table reflects the individual likes and dislikes of its host, they all have a few simple elements in common.

Candles. Light is a staple design aesthetic in every *hyggelig* home. Danes put candles everywhere, and the table is no exception. Candles elevate even the simplest meal and have a way of encouraging everyone to slow down and savor each bite.

Intimacy. While they occasionally host large parties, Danes prefer small circles of guests, no more than six at a time. The benefit of a small gathering is two-fold. First, small dinner parties require less planning, execution, and clean-up. A person is more likely to host several dinners throughout a month or season when the process can be kept small and simple. And second, smaller gatherings are naturally more intimate. When a group gets too large, the host is no longer building relationships and being hospitable; she's entertaining.

Potluck menus. Danish hospitality welcomes teamwork. At a *hyggelig* table, everyone has a role to play. Everyone is needed, and every contribution is valued. It's not uncommon for a host to ask a guest to bring something to contribute to the meal. In doing so, she's creating a familial atmosphere. A potluck lowers the expectations and welcomes imperfection. It makes the meal about the people gathered around the table and not the performance of those who prepared it. It ensures that guests with special dietary needs or preferences will be able to enjoy the meal too.

In America, potlucks are usually reserved for church basements or work break rooms. In Denmark, however, they're welcomed at every table. In fact, touted as their national dish, *smorrebrod* is a potluck on a platter. This unfussy, open-faced sandwich is made of dense rye bread topped with layers of this and that.⁵ When served, guests are invited to bring whatever they have on hand that would create a unique "stone soup" kind of sandwich—from

sliced boiled eggs to leftover fish, from sauteed veggies to flavorful cheeses. To the Danish people, a *smorrebrod* is a meal that says, “I honor you and your needs and what you can contribute to the communal table.”

Rustic recipes. Because of their short growing season, Danish food is simple. They eat what is available. Items are fresh, local, and ethical. Their diet is largely defined by whole foods and rustic comfort recipes centered on fish and various root vegetables. Some might see a *hyggelig* menu as limited, but the Danish people prefer to see it as a chance to create contentment around the table and promote conscious consumption. Eating things in season means you can’t have everything you want when you want it. Instead, you have to get creative and learn how to make beautiful use out of what you have right now. It encourages healthy moderation and a deep appreciation for those things that you can only enjoy every once in a while.

Sippable drinks. Due to the frigid weather conditions known throughout most of northern Europe, no *hyggelig* meal would be complete without a warm mug of mulled cider, hot chocolate, or coffee. Their drinks are slow, steamy, and sippable, inviting everyone to linger just a little bit longer around the table.

TABLE FELLOWSHIP

Hygge can help us create the kind of companionship and close community Christ was referring to when He called the disciples to feed His sheep. The very word *companion* comes from the two Latin words *cum* and *panis*. Together, they mean “with bread.”⁶ Could it be Jesus knew relationships could grow and even be restored in the span of time between bites? That strangers could become friends when food was set between them?

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Shared meals hold social and emotional power—from the complimentary cheesecake wheeled from the cafeteria to the hospital room of proud new parents, to the chicken salad sandwiches served up to a grieving family in the church basement, from the sizzling steaks ordered up to seal the deal over the lunch hour, to the tub of Ben and Jerry's finest brought over by a friend after a crushing breakup. From our

first breath to our last, shared meals seem to always find a place in the big moments of our lives. The fellowship found around a table isn't like Grandma's fine china—reserved for only the important meals. It should be enjoyed in the ordinary moments of everyday life.

Yet our communal tables seem to be getting both smaller and faster. Studies show that nearly half of American adults eat most of their meals alone, and one out of five meals are eaten in a car.⁷ Food has become a simple transaction. We're only willing to spend the time and social energy necessary to fuel our bodies. Relational interaction has become the exception and not the rule.

As followers of Christ, we need to do better. The nourishment we give and receive around the table is about more than just a plate of pasta or a bowl of beans. A meal around a table can potentially provide both an intentional place and an intentional time for people to build relationships through genuine conversations. By its very design, a table forces people into physical proximity, to sit, to slow down. Eyes lock. Ears hear. A table provides a safe cushion between people, drawing them close, but not too close.

A plate full of food nurtures vulnerability. People are more apt to share and listen when some of their attention is redirected to the simple tasks of passing a platter or buttering a biscuit.

Job loss, engagements, spousal abandonment, cancer diagnoses, pregnancies, business promotions—my table has been the threshing floor for all of these. It's been crowded with opportunities to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice (Rom. 12:15). Dinner time has been a conduit for sharing celebrations, service, and sorrow. None of the meals started as interventions or “sharing circles.” They were just meals. But intentional hospitality around the table provided the pause necessary to allow others to share in ways they otherwise wouldn't have.

The table's not only a great place to serve but also a place to be served. Practically speaking, the recipes you make and the rituals you keep are tangible ways you can connect cultures and people down through the ages. When you serve up Grandma's chicken tetrazzini or Uncle Joe's BBQ ribs, you are voluntarily laying your past and your family culture in front of those who've pulled up a chair, inviting them into your *familiar*. In that way, serving a meal can leave you feeling exposed. That vulnerability and connectedness is an important aspect of the give-and-take of hospitality. You don't just need to provide hospitality, you need to be able to receive it, even at your own table. Jesus Himself modeled both vulnerability and connectedness. He knew we were never meant to walk this life as lone rangers.

Jesus often used the table to show us the way to community because a meal is a natural equalizer. Everyone needs to eat. Hunger shows no partiality. It touches the rich and the poor, the famous and the infamous. The table is a place for all. A shared meal not only soothes the pain and loss of the widow and orphan but also gives them a place to belong.

I can't help but think of Lisa, a single woman I met at an informational meeting. We were both new to town, struggling to overcome outsider syndrome. I had formed acquaintances with a total of what felt like .2 people at the time, so our introduction more than doubled my social circle. If memory serves, it was at our second happenstance run-in that I invited Lisa over for lunch. To be honest, before the words of welcome even came out of my lips, I had nearly talked myself out of extending them. She was a twenty-

something, vibrant professional with a life of endless possibilities and no commitments, no strings, no responsibilities weighing her down. I, on the other hand, was a middle-aged married woman with five exceptionally loud kids. My pantry contained the fixings for grilled cheese sandwiches and little else. My offerings were exceptionally underwhelming, to say the least.

Why in the world would she want to sit at my table? I wondered.

The food quality will be low; the noise level will be high. Turns out, she was just as desperate for community as I was. Since she'd grown up as the youngest in a rather large family, she was missing the comfort of crowded living. She came. We ate. Slowly a relationship started to form. In time, I invited her to a Bible study I was a part of. It was a hodgepodge collection of outliers, myself included, who had very little in common, save for Christ. She, a single woman who was exploring faith, fit right in.

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meal of bread and wine was God's plan to remind the stranger that He is good and loving and true. Any time we welcome someone to our table and show them the hospitality God entrusted to us, we have an opportunity to meet their physical need but also to address the deep spiritual hunger only the Bread of Life can fulfill. The word *hospitality* stems from the same Latin root as the word *hospital*.⁸ In that sense, the very act of opening our doors and inviting others to the table can be both preventative and intensive care for humanity. It can provide a natural time and place for offering them the cure for their sin sickness—Jesus—and as a natural side effect, we can build a lasting relationship that will live on through eternity.

It's often tempting to set out plates for familiar ones—our family, our friends, other church members. But while the table is a great place for nurturing a close Christian community, God called us to welcome strangers. In our “This seat's taken” society, let's not forget to leave a few open seats for the wandering ones. In the words of Jesus, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17 NIV). Jesus ate with strangers. He ate with sinners. What's more, He ate with enemies. For His last meal, He invited a man He knew would betray Him. He sent the invite anyway. Eating together is a sign of revolution. It unites folks from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and affiliations and tells the world that peace has been made and a family has been formed.



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Feeding people in obedience to God's instruction and Christ's example is a spiritual act of worship. It is trusting God and His ways. It's laying down our comfort and any elaborate plans we've made to change the brokenness of the world. It's recognizing that the difference between Christian hospitality and a social gospel is Christ. When we look closely at the way He most often changed lives, we see a simple pattern repeated. Jesus met the need in a person's hand before He met the need in their hearts. He made the lame man walk before He called him to step into righteousness. He saved the physical life of the woman caught in adultery before He showed her the way to a life no longer defined by sin. He filled the fishermen's nets before He called them to fish for men. Christ knew that a "Go and sin no more" message would be drowned out by the rumbling of an empty stomach. So Jesus multiplied fish and loaves. He satisfied physical needs before He met spiritual ones, and in the end, the former almost always paved the way for the latter.

WHAT'S THE HOLDUP?

Hyggelig hospitality recognizes that the table is important but only because of the people gathered around it. The table gives value to all and aims to make those gathered feel better when they leave than when they came, including the host. Recently, I learned how exceptionally cordial this kind of reception truly is. While listening to a widely popular lifestyle podcast, I stood baffled as I heard the co-host describe a "run-in" with her neighbors. They had shown up at her doorstep unannounced, and she found their impromptu visit "invasive." Invasive? Really? What about making people feel better? She went on to say that most people need at least a few days' notice before hosting guests. As a woman who hosts guests at least two times a week, I couldn't imagine that

her opinion represented the masses. Surely, her response was the exception and not the rule. Right?

For days I thought about her words. Like a bad country song playing on permanent repeat in my head, I rehearsed the podcast and my feelings about it over and over until I just couldn't stand it anymore. I took to social media to pose one simple question: "Do you find it difficult to invite guests into your home? If so, why?" (Talk about leading the witness.) I hit "publish" fully expecting to receive "Nope. Wanna come over? I've got coffee brewing" as a reply. Like the infamous captain who pronounced the Titanic unsinkable, I could not have been more wrong.

Hundreds of responses began to flood my screen. Women from all around the world, from every walk of life, and every socio-economic status weighed in. Their answer was a resounding, "Yes, it's difficult! I'd like to host people, but I just can't." Confused and a little shell shocked, I began to pull on the thread a bit more. I followed up with many of the commenters and found that while their replies varied, their reservations were all the same. Like that podcast host, these women found hosting others to be imposing for three main reasons.

What if they say no? The threat of rejection is a real possibility. Offering an invitation is a lesson in vulnerability. The practice will often leave you feeling open and exposed. But can I encourage you to send an invite anyway? If that particular person or group of people isn't interested and gives you the brush-off, just consider that offer of hospitality a trial run and try again. Turn to the next person in line. Remember, three out of five people in America are lonely. They, like you, want real and lasting connections. They too fear being dismissed or passed over. Someone has to be brave enough to say, "I'll go first." Will you value the gospel message enough to be the one?

My house is too small. One could also add *too cluttered, too far outside of town, too plainly decorated, too messy, too fill-in-the-*

blank to the lengthy list of house transgressions. I get it. For thirteen of the first twenty years of my marriage, I lived in a teeny, tiny 900-square-foot house on the “bad” side of town. My design aesthetic was “pre-owned,” which was really just code for “hand-me-down” and “thrifted.” It was a perfect starter home, but by the time we moved out, there were seven of us crammed in there. Every day felt like one never-ending game of Sardines.

If I had waited to invite “the stranger” over until I had the right-sized house or ideally located house, or perfectly decorated house, I’d still be waiting.

But space is like money. No matter how much you have, you’ll always think you need more.

If I had waited to invite “the stranger” over until I had the right-sized house or ideally located house, or perfectly decorated house, I’d still be waiting. I had to remind myself that Jesus Himself had nowhere to lay His head. It’s not that He had an imperfect house, but that He had no house at all. Even still, He showed us the way to hospitality. Welcoming the stranger is not confined to a beautiful home or even a big home. It can come on a dusty road headed to Emmaus, along the seaside with the smell of rotting fish being washed up on shore, or even the back bench of a fishing boat being tossed about by the winds and waves. Knowing this, I had to find ways to make my micro-space a place where people could gather and the gospel could grow.

Over the years, in addition to the typical one-and-done dinners,

family holiday gatherings, and Bible study groups, the furniture in my matchbox-sized living room was repositioned to host women's craft groups, costume parties, and fantasy football drafts; board game nights, support groups, and homeschool co-op classes; book clubs, baby showers, and planning meetings. A hodgepodge mix of folding chairs and card tables were crammed into my dining area to create space for annual cookie exchanges, mother-daughter tea parties, ice cream socials, pumpkin carving parties, a couples-only supper club, and numerous work luncheons. Yard toys were wrangled into the garage to make room for father-son campouts, playdates, backyard Bible clubs, campfire cookouts, and neighborhood block parties. An upstairs loft room was renovated for a troubled teen who needed a place to live. The main level eventually became the occasional backdrop for a small but growing church—a motley crew of wanderers who wanted to know God more but who felt out of place, overlooked, or uneasy in a traditional church building. If I had stretched the walls any further, they would have ripped clean through. My point is, I made my small space work for hospitality because, like the Danes, I make room for what is most important in my life.

The space was small, but no one seemed to mind. The tight quarters made everyone scooch a little closer to one another. It serendipitously forced face-to-face connections and intimate conversations. I'll admit, each time I welcomed people over I couldn't help but wonder if someone else should play hostess—someone with a larger home, a bigger table, a more comfortable couch. In the early days, my invitations almost always started with an awkward preamble, "Just so you know, our home is small." But after years of hosting crowds in my cramped quarters, I've come to realize how unnecessary and self-focused that forewarning is. Your home might feel small. But chances are, your guests won't

mind. If we're honest, most of us crave more care and concern than more couch space. Dole out care and concern in lavish ways, and I guarantee no one will feel the least bit crowded.

Hospitality requires too much work. Create a guest list, send invitations, plan a menu, make a playlist, shop for groceries, design



*Welcoming the
stranger chooses service
over performance,
present over perfect.*

a tablescape, unearth and polish the fancy dishes, wash and press the table linens, chill the dessert, prepare the meal, dress for the occasion, light the candles, wash the dishes, do the mopping, “Keep-a busy, Cinderelly!”—perhaps this is the list that churns in your head every time you think about hosting others in your home. If so, no wonder

you’ve stamped “Too much work” over the whole thing. That list is nearly as long as the tax code and would take more than a pack of animated mice to help you complete it.

Might I offer you a word of encouragement I hope will douse the hot flames of frustration that surround your attempts at hosting? Unless Victorian-era aristocracy has suddenly made a comeback in your neighborhood, you might be making hospitality harder than it needs to be. In chaining yourself to a lengthy list of to-dos, you may inadvertently lose sight of the whole point of hospitality: to welcome the stranger. Don’t make the experience about you, make it about them. Remember, Leviticus 19:34 kind of hospitality leads with *’āhab* love. It chooses service over performance, present over perfect.

I realize that for some, no amount of *good-enoughing* will ever feel good enough. Perhaps, like me, you are a “love is in the details”

kind of woman. The time, effort, and consideration you give to the table is your way of showing you care. When you pay—in time, talent, or even in finances—you pay attention. That’s understandable. I’m wired that way too. But if we’re not careful, you and I can easily let perfection turn us into a bunch of draft dodgers, running from that great high call of God to see and know and love the stranger.

Whenever I’m tempted to overcomplicate an invitation, I ask myself these simple questions:

- *Am I thinking about myself—my home, my food, my image—or am I thinking about my guests and what will make them feel loved and welcomed?*
- *Am I scurrying around cleaning, cooking, and preparing to impress them, or is my desire to provide a space that will invite them into my life and the hope I have in God’s Son?*
- *Is my goal to entertain or to help others enter into communion with Christ?*

This simple self-assessment of reasons and reservations helps me to recalibrate my attitude and embrace *hyggelig* hospitality.

PRACTICAL HOSPITALITY

Perhaps hospitality already comes easily for you. It feels like a natural extension of your personality and is a natural go-to for showing love. But then again, maybe it isn’t. Maybe you’re like those many women who responded to my unofficial survey, who feel hospitality is out of reach. You’ll be hospitable when you live in a different house or are in a different season of life, you’ve determined. I urge you not to wait around for ideal conditions or the

pipe dream of perfection. There's rarely a right time for welcoming people to your table. Given the option, you'll almost always talk your way out of it and practice procrastination for the rest of your days. Instead, I challenge you to find ways to make hospitality more manageable in your home and during this season. Here are a few practical, *hygge*-like suggestions for your consideration.

Thrifty dishes. At one time and for some strange reason known only to the gift registry department of my local department store, I owned five sets of dishes. Yes, you read that right. I owned five complete sets. They were all seasonally specific and of varying degrees of *fancy*, only one of which was appropriate for everyday use. But over time, pieces of each set became chipped or cracked or lost. At best, I could scrape together an entire table setting of Christmas dishes and enough matching everyday plates to serve five or six. (Did I mention there are seven people in my family?) So, I decided to purge the clutter and switch to all-white dishes. I began picking them up at tag sales, yard sales, and thrift shops for a few pennies each. I brought them home and pieced together an ever-evolving collection of gently used shabby chic tableware.

None of the pieces match in shape or style; my cupboards look like the Land of Misfit Plates. Yet somehow, their lack of color or collective pattern creates a cohesive look. White is universal and can be dressed up or down to fit any occasion. And the best part about a hodgepodge collection is that it's never limiting. I can host as many or as few people as I want. I'm not constrained by set size. Should one piece get broken or cracked by an excited toddler or an unsteady great-grandpa, I can replace it easily for less than a dollar. Everyone's welcome to use "the good dishes" in my home because thrifting helps me prioritize people over property.

Default meal plan. If you're invited to my house for a family-style supper, you should come prepared to eat chicken alfredo

with bow-tie pasta, a side salad, and garlic bread. If it's more of a sit on the porch and enjoy a cozy conversation kind of visit, I'll serve you a tall glass of Arnie Palmer (lemonade iced tea). If we're inside by the fire, smothered in blankets, you can expect a mug of coffee and a slice of warm banana bread. Should you invite me to a potluck or a pass-a-dish party, you can pencil me down to bring homemade baked mac-n-cheese. Always. This is my default meal plan for hospitality. While I never feel chained to it, especially if a guest has a food allergy or sensitivity, a simple list of potential meals helps me to say yes to hospitality more times than I say no. It frees me from the decision fatigue of menu planning. I can welcome impromptu visitors because I make it a point to have the ingredients for these recipes on hand at all times. Because I've chosen dishes and drinks I'm very comfortable making, I can easily whip them up while doing other things like chatting with my guests, without getting distracted or overwhelmed. These meals are all brainless crowd-pleasers. Most can be prepared in advance in large batches, divided into smaller quantities, and frozen for later use. So, the next time you saunter up to my door for a quick visit, don't be surprised if I duck down to my basement freezer to pull out a mini loaf of banana bread. I'll pop it in the oven to reheat and be almost ready to serve it up by the time you've hung up your coat.

While it might sound boring to always serve the same thing, the truth is, most people are so grateful for something hot and tasty to eat that they never notice what *is* or *is not* included on the menu. Food made and shared with love is always appreciated.

Hospitality budget. You don't have to have deep pockets to show love in tangible ways around the table. The Bread of Life is nourishing even when accompanied by peanut butter and jelly. A prayer of corporate thanksgiving can be lifted over lobster or leftovers. I find that I'm more comfortable with hospitality when I allocate for

it. Even during our most lean years when there was more month than money, I tried to make our grocery bill a bigger line item in the budget. At times, that meant foregoing weekend take-out or early morning coffee runs. To this day, we rarely go to restaurants, but choose to devote any extra fun-food money to the hospitality column. I can't just give lip service to table ministry. As with all things in life, my wallet reflects what I find most valuable. While my weekly grocery bill has increased, so have my relationships.

Hyggelig hospitality often involves potluck-style meals. If your budget is tight, don't be afraid to ask guests to contribute to the meal. Certain personalities *prefer* to help in some way so as not to leave the host with all the responsibility. Consider creating a charcuterie board—a platter of various meats, cheeses, nuts, fruit, bread, and really anything that can be mixed and matched to form a finger-food-style sample platter. Guests could each be assigned to bring one or two items of their choosing to add to the collective tray.

Build-your-own dinners are another way to assemble a crowd-sourced meal. As the host, you can supply the main ingredient and ask your guests to each bring an item to contribute. Not only are these types of meals easy to prepare, but they're also versatile, especially for those with small children or picky eaters. Similar to a painting, a build-your-own dinner starts with a blank canvas—meat, broth, starch, or grain—created by the host. Each person can then add an assortment of colors, flavors, and textures to their canvas to suit their tastes. It's both a meal and an activity rolled into one.

Doorstep hospitality. Sometimes the best, most sincere form of hospitality is the kind that doesn't require overthinking. It's served up spontaneously and never a burden to the giver or the receiver. When a friend does poorly on a final exam, when your pastor is asked to perform the funeral of a beloved church member, when



your neighbor gets served with divorce papers—these are times when perhaps even an informal dinner invitation would feel overwhelming or stressful to you and to them. A simple and impromptu gesture of hospitality can be delivered right to their door, however, allowing them to immediately taste and see that God is still good and that He still cares for them.

This form of service, while seemingly impulsive, does require a little bit of premeditation. Begin to pay attention to the fun-food

preferences of the major players in your life—your friends, family, coworkers, pastor, coaches, teachers, and neighbors. What kind

of coffee do they usually order? What snack foods do they grab in the minimart while paying for gas? What ice cream flavor do they consistently order when you're out together? If answering these questions is too difficult to do in stealth mode, don't be afraid to just ask. No one will be offended that you care enough about them to want to know their signature drink. Keep a running list of their names and

The burden and the blessing of hospitality can and should be part of the collective heartbeat of your entire house and all its members.

their favorites on your phone. Then the next time you get wind of their difficult day, you can swing over to their place with a triple-venti, half sweet, nonfat caramel macchiato to show that their pain is seen, that they are seen. For around five dollars, you can provide no-fuss 'āhab.

Hospitality helpers. Hospitality can feel like a strain when all the responsibility is on your shoulders. But, unless you live alone, both the burden and the blessing of hospitality can and should be part of the collective heartbeat of your entire house and all its members, even the youngest ones. When you invite your children into *hyggelig* hospitality and entrust them with a real job that benefits others, you are saying, “Your gifts are needed here. This task, this place, these people need you.” They begin to see where their God-given talents and their place in His kingdom work collide. In that way, your home becomes a training ground for the next generation of *hygge* hosts.

Even young children can greet guests at the door, take coats, provide toys and friendship for kid guests, create and display a welcome sign in the driveway or entryway, offer to bring a drink, or show guests to the bathroom as needed. Brainstorming with kids about possible questions they can ask the guests and training them in proper table manners is a kindness you can give them. It helps children feel confident in new social scenarios; it provides them with tangible tools for creating a comfortable and considerate environment for a guest; and it reinforces the fact that children have something to contribute to the relationships being formed.

PRESENCE BEFORE PERFECTION

Hygge provides a means of hosting others without wearing yourself slap-out with a lengthy list of to-dos. It's a belief that people hunger for more than just a great meal, they crave connection. *Hyggelig* hospitality doesn't preclude tidying up or putting your best foot forward. It just means you don't have to feel the need to sterilize your life and wipe out every evidence of brokenness from your home. It means you don't have to secret your real self and your real messes away. It encourages you to share your whole self so your guests feel comfortable enough to do the same.

During one particularly difficult season of relational busyness when I was having trouble finding time to make connections with both friends and strangers, *hygge* hospitality became a life-line. I sent out an appeal on social media to two other women who seemed in a similar state of emotional poverty. I invited them for a bi-weekly playdate of sorts. Like me, those ladies were tired—parched and empty. As moms of many little ones, they were strung out on the drug of efficiency. They needed to find a

way to thrive, not just survive, another wearisome winter. What they needed most of all was the gentle kindness of a Savior more than willing to unburden their shoulders if they'd only let Him. A quick consultation of our collective calendars showed we all had a least two weekday mornings a month free from work obligations. So, we formed a plan to spend the fall months in rest together.

With kids in tow, every other Tuesday found us gathered at a home—my home at first, but eventually theirs too as they soon learned to embrace the easy hospitality of *hygge*. We took turns welcoming and being welcomed. We'd slough off our snow boots by the door, pile our coats and mittens in a heap by the closet, and point our kids in the direction of playrooms or game tables.

There was no agenda. Expectations were low. It was always a slow morning filled with talking, laughing, and purposeful care of one another—me with my friends and my kids with theirs. As friendships strengthened, conversations naturally took on deeper and weightier topics such as mounting medical bills and marital trouble. Jesus met us there on the couch every other Tuesday because we were purposeful to save Him a spot.

Somewhere midday, an assembly line was formed. We paused to make lunch. A simple spread of meat and cheese sandwiches on buns, chips, and fruit was the uncomplicated menu every time—no gourmet, no fuss, no decision fatigue. We embraced the scruffy hospitality of *hygge*, overlooking piles of clean but unfolded laundry, breakfast dishes in the sink, and toddlers running around in Superman capes. We spread our arms wide to authentic living because there was safety in numbers. We'd just rest and enjoy being with one another. And that was enough.⁹

Just before He left this earth all those many years ago, Jesus extended an invitation. He is right now preparing a lavish feast for His bride. If you are in Christ, you're not only welcomed at that

table, but you have the privilege of welcoming others to it on His behalf. Your home and your table can be where introductions are made. Welcome the stranger. Show them the *'āhab* of God. See them. Know them. Love them with the hospitality of *hygge*.

CONSIDERING HOSPITALITY

1. Was there ever a time when you felt ministered to through a shared meal?
2. What were the best parts of the experience? How did the hosts or meal providers make you feel seen, known, and loved?
3. Do you find hosting people in your home difficult or invasive, and why?
4. What practical changes might you make to make hosting easier and more enjoyable for you?
5. Who in your life is a stranger in need of the *'āhab* love of God?
6. What form of hospitality could you extend to that person in this season of life?
7. Who are the major players in your life? What are their fun-food favorites?

TASTE AND SEE

- Hebrews 13:2
- 1 Peter 4:9
- Romans 12:13
- Luke 14:12–14

A PRAYER FOR HOSPITALITY

Lord, You have called me to welcome the stranger and to show them Your 'āhāb love. Open my eyes to see who in my life needs the companionship of Christ. Reveal to me practical ways to help them feel seen, known, and loved. Don't allow my insecurities or my self-focus to keep me from extending my table to them. May my home be a place where others can not only be fed a meal but also nourished with the Bread of Life. Amen.