

## *A Welcome Place*

*When you open your heart to a stranger,  
you have welcomed the Savior as well.*

## *Keep the Welcome Mat Out*

Every home has an invisible welcome sign. When someone walks up our sidewalk, they can sense an attitude of hospitality by the time they reach our front door. Though this house does not sport a wraparound porch filled with rockers, one thing is always present: the welcome mat. Often, the kind of mat people see on our porches reflects the personalities of those inside the home. Most of you are probably visualizing a straw or rubber mat for depositing earthly burdens (mud, leaves, and gum, for example) at the door.

But that's not the kind of mat I'm talking about. The outside mat clues us in to something deeper, something more—invisible. Usually we find one of two responses when we knock on someone's door: In one, the first words out of the hostess's mouth are: "Oh, I'm so sorry, excuse the house, please. It's such a mess." Especially if you are making an unannounced visit. The second woman swings open the door, and like a *Southern Living* hostess, draws, "Y'all come on in. I'm so glad to see you!"

I know many women whose welcome signs are always visible—in their hearts, as well as on their front porches. Margaret was such a woman. Several years ago she invited our family as guests for dinner in her home. When Margaret opened her door, the sound of a Spanish guitar greeted us from the corner entertainment center. The pungent smell of onions, garlic, and sweet fiery peppers floated through the air. Real Mexican food—not your ordinary take-out tacos and burritos. Our mouths were watering before we crossed the hallway into the living room.

Margaret and her husband, both schoolteachers, graciously asked about each of us, even our children. Margaret seemed neither nervous nor anxious, but moved about gracefully like a Spanish dancer in slow motion. Festive, colorful dinnerware graced the dining room table, but there was nothing formal about Margaret's attitude. She seated us, not at the table, but in the living room, pointing to the coffee table where loving hands had prepared a delectable appetizer: fresh homemade salsa and warm chips. Her husband took our drink orders, and in a minute, they both returned with iced tea and water.

I expected Margaret to rush back to the kitchen and finish preparing dinner for us. Instead, she removed her shoes, sat on the floor and scooted up a pillow around the low coffee table. While we nibbled on the pre-dinner goodies, she stayed and visited. I kept thinking, *This scene is familiar to me*. But it wasn't until later that I realized why.

After we had gorged ourselves with peppery chips and nourishing conversation, Margaret delegated her husband to visit a little longer. Then she returned once again to the kitchen. Immediately, she began to lay out a sumptuous feast, lovingly prepared beforehand. As we moved toward the

dining room, I noticed the carefully detailed touches that adorned the table: fresh homemade rolls, flower-shaped butter pats, and a tossed salad with carrot curls and artful veggies. When we finished her gazpacho soup, cheese enchiladas, beans, and Spanish rice, we all felt like shouting, “Ole!” “Bravo!” Obviously she knew—and enjoyed her craft. Just when we thought we couldn’t stuff another bite into our mouths, Margaret brought out individual plates of luscious strawberry-filled crepes.

*If you would have guests merry with cheer, be so yourself, or so at least appear.*

Benjamin Franklin

We heard no fuss, no apologies, no grumbling for lack of help, but an ability to converse freely. She gave us her total attention. From the moment we arrived until our late night exit, Margaret’s heart and hands said, “Welcome, friends! You are my important guests tonight.”

Later as I was thinking and maybe envying Margaret’s hospitality skills, I knew why that scene at Margaret’s home had seemed so familiar. In that season of my life during my thirties, I considered myself a “Mary”—certainly not a “Martha,”—primarily because of my falling soufflés, burnt toast, and *Gone with the Wind* housekeeping habits. When I visited others’ homes, I often lingered for quiet, meaningful conversation rather than opt for fussy details in the kitchen.

When I entertained, however, “Martha” suddenly emerged like a Hyde from Dr. Jekyll. I reverted to what Sandra Felton might call “The Irrational Messie.” I scrubbed every floor until I could see my face in it, scoured the bathrooms until bleach fumes begged for escape through open windows, dug out all my best Safeway china, tied every white cloth napkin with tiny blue ribbons, and placed small calligraphy placards on every shelf and table in the house. By the time company arrived, however, dinner was still steaming in the kitchen—and so was I.

When my guests rang the doorbell, I hastily opened the door, issued a quick hug, and then ran back to my marathon of stirring, mixing, chopping, and simmering. Most of the time, company followed me into the kitchen, where I quickly enlisted them in kitchen duty, or my husband, Larry, kept them entertained in the living room until dinner was ready. By the time I sat down, my body was too tired or numb to even hear the conversation, much less enjoy it.

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When I invited Jesus into my home as Master Designer, I thought of Margaret. Jesus looked down at my front porch and spoke gently, almost in a whisper: “You need a new welcome mat.”

Embarrassed, I glanced down at the frayed piece of straw on my front porch and realized my welcome mat had become fuzzy and worn. Maybe I had even turned it upside down or bleached the words right off in one of my cleaning fits. The word, “Welcome,” was no longer visible.

I looked at the One who received all his guests—friends and strangers alike—with open arms, and I knew He had started at the right place. To

Jesus, no one was a stranger. Child or leper, thief or priest saw “welcome” on the front door of His heart. He had no roof over His head, no place to call His own. Yet Jesus knew how to create mansions out of tents.

What to serve His guests? Not a problem for Jesus. With a prayer of thanks and a touch of His hands, He transformed even the smallest of offerings into plentiful feasts. He’s always ready for good conversation and is more concerned with a clean heart than a clean house.