Who's in our seats (Part 1)
Rolling out the Red Carpet
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we are launching a series that's going to take us all the way through August, talking about *who's in our seats*. And today, we are going to talk about rolling out the red carpet and the hospitality we desire to show the community and the crowd here each week at Woodland Hills. I want to start by just talking about the obvious of saving sets at church and how stressful that can be on some of you. Some of you are the early bird in your family. Raise your hand if you're the early bird. You get places to show up, throw the coats and purses. Remember in the old days at the church with bulletins. And sometimes it would be a family reunion you're trying to hold these seats for.

I want to speak on your behalf for just a moment to your inconsiderate family members. You got here early while they just took their time in the drive thru at McDonalds or at Starbucks, giving no thought to you. And I want to say this with all the love I can muster up: We hate you! Knock it off! You're making our lives miserable! We've had to tell no less than 20 people, "Sorry, these seats are saved."

But there is somebody worse than that person that doesn't show up on time. It's the person that doesn't show up. You saved a seat, and they decided not to come. You are out of the will. You will get no money upon my death.

I remember years ago I was at a church in Kansas City Sitting on the front row. They put their announcements on cards, and they had them on every seat. So, if there were a thousand seats in this auditorium and every seat had one… They were like two to three songs in and I'm standing at the front. This family walks by me and they are looking for seats. They would do a lap and come by me again. That's when I realized they thought those cards were saving seats for people and I thought *do I just let them keep taking laps or do remove a card?* And I said, "We are saving this seat just for you and your family."

Right before the pandemic, our church was running around 2,000 people on campus on Sundays. And coming back from the pandemic, we took about eight weeks off and then we built all the outdoor seating and tried to get people coming back, so we had about 800 to thousand people that came back pretty quickly that summer. But then we got back to the 2,000 number and five years later, we are at the 3,000 number on campus on the weekends. On special days, we can hit 3,500, and obviously, easter, we go over 4,000.

Today, we are talking about who's in our seats and who we want to invite to be a part, and how do we make room for them, and how do we treat them when they're here? We know finding a seat at church can be hard. If you're new to Woodland Hills. Where should you sit?

Today and every Sunday, not just special days at our church. Today and every Sunday, we are rolling out the red carpet. What do we mean by that? It's just a very special welcome. We're glad you're here, we've been thinking about you, we've been preparing for your visit. From the parking lot experience, which we hope was good, how you were greeted, to the golf cart ride, to the drinks that you were served. We've lost count of how many people tried to pay us for these drinks. To how your children are received and cared for, to someone helping you find a seat. Let's hear it for Al and Joe and all the folks here and across campus. To answering your question, to even our prayer team.

I don't know if you know this but the number of times people on the prayer team and even throughout the week meeting with people to pray and minister to them, they will, almost like concierge service, go and pick up kids from work. They are here to serve. Their desire is to serve. But it's also the person you're sitting by right now who can simply ask the question: How are you doing? And this one I love asking. I ask it every week to countless people on this campus. Where are you from? Because no body here is from here. And you always get a great story.

So, why are we here today? Why do we gather? This is so important to start off with to understand that the church is made up of believers. It's people who have professed faith in Christ, believers. It's why you hear some pastors make this statement often: You can't go to church when you are the church. So, you are the church.

But today, on campus, we have the church gathered, but there are people here who are not believers. They'll be in all three gatherings. So, what are we doing here? Well, five things. We gather today to worship God, to become more like Jesus.

We want to take on the teachings of "Christ, the life of "Christ, but the service or the gathering, is so much more than just worship and just opening our Bibles to read. That is part of it, a major part of it, but there is so much more going on every time we gather, believer in Christ Jesus. We also enjoy fellowship with one another. That's why we try to put as much time between gatherings as we can, so you don't have to rush out. You can get here early. You can greet friends, family, and new people. We're also here to serve others. Over 400 people at our church today are here to serve. That's what it takes. It takes over 400 people a Sunday to make a gathering happen. And we're here to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, that he died and rose again for you and your sins. And the reason we offer hospitality and the reason we roll out the red carpet is because we want you… we read this in Luke 19: 10 – ***The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost***. And we want you to find faith in Christ.

So, the strategy behind all of this… and if you've been to Starting Point, you know we share this. We are going to be going through this in this series.

And today we're talking about the community and the crowd. We're going to move toward the center, the core of the church. These 400 people that are here today making up and making this place happen. But the community we would describe our community as Southwest Missouri, northwest Arkansas. And our desire, as we go out and do our jobs this week, as we go out to restaurants, as go out to stores, that we are a presence in the community and welcoming people to what God is doing at the gathering at Woodland Hills Family Church. And that's the crowd.

Today in the crowd, we will have believers, and we will have non-believers. As you take steps in your faith and as you take steps in this church, we want you to understand this clearly. Moving from the community to the core isn't about privilege. It's just the opposite. Moving from the community to the core of this church is about commitment and it's about serving. It's about descending into greatness. Moving toward the core means greater commitment in your life and greater service.

So, when we think about the gathering…. I want to take us today to James. It's very important that we understand the heart of our Father in heaven toward people. And then we carry ourselves in a way, every time we gather, to reflect his heart. In James, we read, ***suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. It's very important to understand this passage is not about the gold ring and fine clothes.*** It's not about telling you to stop dressing up for church. This is not the point. You just know this is a person who has money, wealth, who can offer some things.

And at the same time, a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in… I'll be honest with you. I hope both are here today and both are here regularly but how do you treat these people when they show up? How do you treat the rich man and the poor man, the rich woman and the poor woman? How do you care for them? It says very clearly, Verse 3***, if you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and*** says, "Here's a good seat for you… We're going to be taking an offering in a minute, and we would like you to give. We've got some things we'd like to do. And you know if there is one thing the church gets blasted for all the time and pastors get blasted for all the time, it's being money hungry. It's the desire for money. So, let's treat the rich person well so they'll give more and fund what's going on.

But James is telling us that is not how it should be.

I have friends who do ministry in parachurch ministries. They do donor events, and they do golf in this and golf in that. And they will say," Why doesn't the church consider…" and I'll have to say " I'm not allowed to have a special event where I treat some people special and neglect others. We have bible verses on this stuff. We have to be very careful that we don't treat the wealthy with special attention, special privileges. But it's not that we neglect them either. It's like you and I are called… It's very clear. ***You say to the poor man, "You stand there, you sit on the floor by my feet."***

Look at what it says in Verse 4 – ***Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts***. This is not the heart of our heavenly father for you or for me. We should be engaging the wealthy when they step in, and we should be engaging the impoverished when they walk in. And it goes beyond just when they walk in, but they are the ones we should be inviting. How many of you drove by someone today on the way to Woodland hills today? They were just coming out of their hotel room because that's where they call home, or they were headed toward it or they were walking to work. Our desire as a church is to be welcoming and to bring them in to say, "Come on, be a part of what God is doing at Woodland Hills. We are not to be showing favoritism to certain groups of people. Just the opposite. We don't show special attention or give special treatment to big deals because we believe every person that walks on this campus matters to God and should matter to us. Every person here today, in my mind, is a big deal, and we're glad you're here; you matter.

Pastor Timothy Keller went to be with the Lord a couple of years ago. He said this: *"Biblical hospitality goes far deeper than merely entertaining your family and friends. It*

goes beyond just having someone over for a nice meal. When you talk Biblical hospitality in the bible, hospitality is proactively seeking to welcome the marginalized, the people that don't get invited anywhere. The people that don't have others in their lives to say, "Come over, I want to entertain you or to show you hospitality.

Jesus, in Luke: 14 said it this way: ***Jesus said to his host, "when you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends, your brother, sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbors. If you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid."***

I don't think Jesus could be anymore clear in this text.

Verse 13 – ***When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous***.

When we talk about rolling out the red carpet, by the world's standard, the red carpet is for elites, dignitaries, celebrities, but Jesus rolled it out for the least of these, and said, "You have a very special welcome. For the least of these and for the sinner. And I'm here to tell you, if a church or you in your life make the decision to go after those who are caught up in sin, yes, it can be messy, it can be awkward, it can be uncomfortable, but this is who Jesus came to seek and to save. And we are to go after them. But when you follow Jesus and welcome sinful people, you're going to be accused of all sorts of stuff. He was.

Luke 15: 2 – ***But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. How unclean, how nasty is that?*** But this was the heart of Jesus. And it should be our heart as well. He didn't welcome sinners to affirm their sin. "He didn't welcome sinners to say, You're okay. They way your living is fine."

He came to seek and save the lost. He came so that they would repent and believe in him. And when we offer hospitality as a church, that is what we are doing.

And that's what I want to spend the next few minutes encouraging us with is hospitality as a church, because we believe that excellence in environment and experience honors God and inspires people. This is why we put a lot of energy and a lot of time into it.

Author and pastor Max Lacado says this: "It's not accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result – healing"

I love the specialty drinks. How many of you are grateful for whoever handed you this drink today? I love it because it's telling people, "You matter," "we thought of you." You may think you're just giving somebody a simple drink, but the statement that it makes… When you open the door to someone, you're sending this message. You matter to God and to me. You may think you're just saying come over for a visit, but what your guests hear is *I'm worth the effort*.

Years ago, Dan Cathy was sharing with me as he's so passionate about the Lord's Chicken at Chick-fil-A. He said, "We get our word restaurant from the French word that means to restore. And a good meal should restore you 70% in your heart and 30% stomach." Unless you are a teenager. Then it's flipped. He said, But a good meal isn't just about the food you're eating… And this is why we read in Acts 2 – ***The believers ate together with glad and sincere hearts.*** Fellowship around the Lord and our desire is to provide that every single week. Not just on special days at Woodland Hills, but every single week, as we invite people from the community to be a part of the crowd here gathering on Sunday morning.

I love the stories and encourage you to look up the TED Talk by Will Gadeira. He wrote a great book called **Unreasonable Hospitality**. I love the subtitle – *The remarkable power of giving people more than they expect.* That's what happens every week around here from our children's ministry to our student ministry, our young adult ministry, our prayer team, hospitality. They are giving people more than they expected. We love the moments where people are like, "I didn't see that coming." Will Gedeira… He owned one of the nicest, finest restaurants in New York City called *11 Madison Park*. He bought it in 2006. Shortly after he bought it, it hit the list of the top 50 restaurants in the world. But the nicest restaurant in New York. If you Google 11 Madison Park, you're going to see this unbelievable beautiful dining room. You've probably seen it in movies and on TV. It will look familiar to you. It's gorgeous.

He said, "What took us on that 50 top restaurants list to number one restaurant in the world not too many years ago… They became the number one restaurant in the world. He has since sold it. He said, "What landed us at number one was a hot dog. Now, 11 Madison Part, if you go there, you are going to spend anywhere between three and five hundred dollars a person. So, this is not like Cracker Barell. This is 10 and 15 courses tasting menus, and unbelievable service and hospitality.

He said, “One afternoon we had a pretty busy lunch schedule and so as the owner, he’s out there busing tables. And if you’ve seen him talk, this is just his personality. He said he went over to a table with four foodies that were visiting New York City. As he’s clearing the appetizer portion of their meal, he hears them talking about all the finest restaurants they’ve been to in New York City. He just started listing them. They were like, can you believe it, this has been the trip of a lifetime.

Then he heard one guy say, “My only regret is that we never got a New York City hotdog. That was all Will Gedeira needed to hear. He gathered the plates, went back to the kitchen, dropped them off in the kitchen and he headed across the part that was right next to the restaurant, over to a hotdog stand and bought a two-dollar New York City hotdog. He said the hard part was convincing the chef to serve it. But since he was the owner, he was able to get him to serve it. He said, “Would you please serve this> and the guy was like, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” But then the Chef did it. He cut it into four perfect pieces, then put it on plates, put a swish of ketchup, a swish of mustard, a swish of sauerkraut. And whatever else you’d want on a hot dog.

He put it on there and then right before their last savory course, the chef and owner, Will Gedeira, brings out these hot dogs and sets them down. When they were headed back to the airport, what do you think of all the places and the thousands of dollars that they spent on food, what do you think they were talking about? A New York City hot dog.

I love this story because when we talk hospitality, some people think extreme, extravagant, you gotta spend a lot of money. No, Will Gedeira says this: “If you are in the service business and you want to beat out all the competition, don’t use the word service, use the word hospitality.”

If you are a plumber and you want to grow your business, everything you plumb, you be thinking hospitality. He breaks down the difference between service and hospitality. “Getting the right plate to the right person at the right table. That’s service. They expect that. Some of you are going to go to Cracker Barell after this or I Hop after this, and you are going to order something, and you are going to expect it to take this long. You are going to have expectations and if you’re served well, all of that is going to take place, but genuinely engaging with the person you are serving so you can make an authentic connection, that’s hospitality, And that’s our desire here at Woodland Hills Family Church, and that is that there is authentic connection with people and with guests that show up to our church.

I know for a lot of church members, they show up week after week wanting to see the people they know, catch up with the people they know but I want us all to become experts at giving hospitality and engaging people with where are you 'from? How are you doing? This church does this so well, but I'm going to encourage you just to step it up.

So, we are going to call it hot dog hospitality. Some of you are thinking you are getting a hot dog after this service. No. We didn't think you'd want a hot dog at10: 52. Some of you are going, "Speak for yourself."

Be present and aware. This is key. Open your eyes a little wider at work this week. Open your eyes a little bit wider, care a little bit more, try a little bit harder, and realize you can do for one what you can't do for all. So, I'm not saying do this with everybody, but find the moment… Will Gedeira says this hot dot thing took over his restaurant where his staff started saying, "How can we provide this more for our customers and guests? He actually hired somebody to customize these experiences. Open your eyes wider, care more, try harder. Deliver the unexpected.

Service is expected. Do you want to know what ruins all of this. It's entitlement. It ruins the whole mood. But deliver the unexpected and customize the service. It doesn't have to be one size fits all. Gedeira shares the story about when he was finding an apartment, he and his wife in New York. He said, "When you look at apartment after apartment, after apartment, with a realtor, nobody gets to know you better than a realtor. And as they get to know you… they know your financial situation. They know so much about you. Think about the opportunity they have to customize the experience. At best, when you close on a house in New York, you may get a bottle of champagne in the fridge. At the very least, they are just going to throw the keys on the counter."

He said, "but what if that realtor was hearing me and my wife the whole time talking about looking for a nook where my wife could put an exercise mat and just thinking that through and when they finally find a place… If we would have walked into an exercise mat leaning up against that nook with a candle and a welcome to your new home."

This, to me, is so easy. Those of you that are housekeepers in hotels, every time I've walked into a hotel, and they made me an elephant out of the towels… I'm still blown away, like how do you have that much time on your hands? Who taught you this?

It's these little moments that we can deliver on.

You go to a concert, and someone is holding up a sign that says, "*Your song got me through my cancer treatments."* When that artist goes over and sings to that person and then at the end, takes the guitar off and hands it to them, doing for one what you can't do for all, it spreads out through everybody.

I've been picked on relentlessly for this at our church. In staff meetings, we talk about things we can do, and I said, "Wouldn't it be cool if when we get the drinks out on Sunday… morning… I brought this up years ago. I've been shot down on this idea for five years. I go, "what if when they get their drink, we have three donuts stacked on the straw. I'm not giving one to everybody, but you get three donuts and a specialty drink.

I was talking to David Nasser who was here a couple of weeks ago about this and he said, "Ted, I have felt incredible hospitality while eating potato chips on a pontoon boat. I said, "That will work in the Ozarks. He said, "I felt included and so welcome, but I've also eaten $300 meals in Boughey restaurants where I've felt forgotten. I just want you to know that the needs of our community and the needs of our church are great. It's vast. People have emotional needs, physical needs, relational needs, financial needs.

I don't know what your job is this week as you head out into the community… I've listed a couple of them.

Hotel receptionist
Housekeeper
Car salesman
Doctor
Dentist
Mom
HVAC Tech
Teacher
Pest Control Techs
Carpenter
Cashier
Firefighter
Police officer
Deputy
Truckers
Uber drivers
Mechanic

You get the point. We serve people all week long. We want to be hospitable. For those of you that work in anything I just mentioned, remember you are going to come in contact this week with people who just bought their first house, and they are so excited, but you are also going to come in contact with people who were foreclosed on. Or who are living in a hotel on the strip. You're going to come in contact with people that just got their dream job and they're so excited, but you are also going to come in contact with people who were recently fired and are unemployed. You are going to talk to people who are planning a wedding and at the same time meet people signing the papers on their divorce.

Meeting people released from prison and those about to be sentenced. You're going to talk to people who just rang the bell that they are cancer free and then you're going to meet someone on the job who was recently diagnosed.

On the job, you're going to talk to someone who just welcomed their first child and at the same time, you'll meet someone who just lost their first child.

You and I get to show hospitality every single day in everything we do. We get to lock eyes with people, the marginalized, the sick, the hurting, the highs, lows, grief, joy, praise, lament. We get to step into everyday moments. Unexpected, authentic connections can take place and we can meet needs. Invite them to be a part of this gathering. Invite them to what God is doing at this church.

I'm going to end with a story I heard this week from pastor Josh Howardton about Morticia Hamm. You want to talk about inspiring. He was an American Tent revival preacher in the early 1900's. In 1934, he was in charlotte, North Carolina with a tent revival. Two teenage boys, 16 years old, walked by, looked inside the tent to find out what was going on and they saw that it was packed. There were no seats available, so they just backed up and started walking away. But an usher saw them and chased them down. He said, "Boys, if you want to be a part of what's going on in there, I will find you seats.

The two boys came back. He asked some people to move, and he found these two boys each a seat. That night, Billy Graham gave his life to Jesus. And so did his best friend, Grady Wilson. To this day, no one knows that usher's name, but he's the hero of this story. He found two boys seats and it forever changed their lives and the lives of millions. So, the next time and usher at woodland Hills Family Church asks you to get up and scoot

in, move your hind end. Billy Graham went on to do the crusades, Grady Wilson was the one that organized all the crusades.

I want to encourage you to make room because you never know who you're making room for. And if I can encourage you, it's not just making room at 10:00, but 8:15 and 11: 45.

I want you to go out this week and invite someone. Don't even tell them we have 10:00 It's 8:15 and 11: 45. Let's scoot in, make room and that's who's going to be in our seats.

Father, for the one here today who has never placed faith in Jesus, that they not only feel welcomed here today, knowing they matter to you, they matter to us, but that today would be the day they repent of their sins, confess Jesus is Lord, believe in their heart he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. That today they would acknowledge that they are lost.

I pray for Woodland Hills. Continue to use this church in this community. Help us to reach out to bring people from the community to the crowd to begin showing hospitality, care for them that this would be something each of us, as part of this church, owns and runs with. For that we are grateful. We pray all of this in the authority and mighty name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said… Amen.