

“Radical Hospitality” (Sermon #1 in “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” series)

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 10:12-22

New Testament: Romans 12:1-13

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The church of Jesus Christ has always struggled with the tensions of “taking care of our own” and reaching out beyond ourselves to care for the rest of God’s own—whoever they are and wherever they may be.

Church leaders and ministers have always struggled with the tensions of caring for people within the church and reaching out to those who may not have a relationship with Christ or a relationship with a church family.

It gets said in lots of different ways, but most church leaders throughout the history of the church have heard something like this: **You need to spend most of your time visiting us. You need to keep us happy. You need to design worship services we like. You need to develop programs with us in mind. After all, we were here first and we pay the bills.**

At my former church, during an officer training event, a colleague of mine who was leading the training did the following exercise with the officers. He had all the officers make a single-file line facing him. He read a series of two choices for how they wanted me to spend my time on a given day.

If you voted for choice A, you were to move to the left; choice B move to the right.

Each set of the two choices offered in the series of questions reflected the tension between the inward focus of the church and the outward focus of the church. Many of the other choices reflected a multitude of other tensions.

It was excruciating to watch. On virtually every set of choices, the officers would almost evenly divide to the right and left. Sometimes they’d change their minds and jump to the other side. Some just stood in the middle not knowing what to do. I could identify! It was clear that they and I together struggled with the church’s priorities.

Over the next five weeks, we are going to be studying the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* by Robert Schnase. I hope you have picked up your

devotional book at the kitchen counter. If not, please do so after church and start the daily readings today.

This series suggests that fruitful congregations practice:

- **Radical Hospitality**
- **Passionate Worship**
- **Intentional Faith Development**
- **Risk-Taking Mission and Service**
- **Extravagant Generosity**

You'll notice both an inward and outward dimension to these practices, although the series will push us to see that even the more inwardly focused practices – passionate worship and intentional faith development—are for the purpose of equipping, empowering and strengthening us to be outwardly focused Christians.

Today our focus is **radical hospitality**. Schnase says this:

“Vibrant, fruitful congregations practice **Radical Hospitality**. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, their laity and pastors take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ. Their members focus on those outside their congregation with as much passion as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already belong to the family of faith, and they apply their utmost creativity, energy and effectiveness to the task, exceeding all expectations.

“The words radical and hospitality are not usually together in one phrase. To advance the church, perhaps they should be.

“Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. **It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers.** Beyond intention, hospitality practices the gracious love of Christ, respects the dignity of others, and expresses God's invitation to others, not our own. Hospitality is a mark of Christian commitment to grow in Christ likeness by seeing ourselves as part of the community of faith, **‘not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28).**’ By practicing hospitality, we become part of God's invitation to new life, showing

people that God values them and loves them” (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Schnase, pp. 11-12).

Our various Scripture lessons for today illustrate how God’s people have struggled with the whole matter of hospitality – especially radical hospitality to strangers.

Jonah was called to Nineveh—land of people he did not like and who had previously harmed his nation. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn the people of future destruction if they did not repent of their wickedness. Jonah ran in the other direction. Most of know the part about Jonah getting tossed overboard while trying to escape God and getting swallowed by a big fish. After being spat up by the fish, Jonah preaches in Nineveh. Lo and behold, they repent and God doesn’t destroy them. Jonah is upset. He doesn’t want the Ninevites embraced by God’s love. He doesn’t want them to be part of the family of faith. Jonah does not get the hospitality award.

In our lesson from Deuteronomy Moses is giving a history review. He says: “What does the Lord require of you? Fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to keep the commandments and his decrees. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Moses says remember how it felt to be an outsider, to be the object of prejudice, to be mistreated for who you were. Turn that around now. Love the strangers you encounter. Treat these strangers as you would have hoped to be treated when you were a stranger in Egypt. Show hospitality.

Do you remember when you were a “stranger” or newcomer in this church? Maybe you are today – we welcome you. Have you recently been a stranger in another church? School? Workplace? Gym? Senior Center? Youth Group?

What does it feel like to be a newcomer? A stranger? How did the regulars make you feel? Did you know your way around? Did you know the groups’ inside language?

I’m a relative newcomer to the YMCA where I’m working out. I usually go with a good friend of mine. And for that I am very grateful. I’m a stranger in the YMCA. I don’t know my way around. I don’t the language—what is a hamstring anyway? I don’t know where the equipment is kept. When we do a class together she helps me learn the ropes. I’ve noticed she very kindly does this for others, as

well—even at the expense of some of her exercise time. She is showing hospitality to strangers. And it makes a difference.

Every time we see a newcomer at church, remember what it may feel like for him or her. Reach out with the love of Christ. At youth group, or men’s dinners, or women’s dinners, at Prime Timers and Not Ready for Prime Timers, church family dinners make it your goal to reach out to those who are on the sidelines, who are new, who don’t know the ropes. Choose to serve. Choose to be hospitable. It’s not as fun as sitting with your buds. It’s not as comfortable as hanging out with the people you already know. But imagine yourself in the shoes of the newcomer.

Clearly, RADICAL hospitality is tougher than just your garden variety hospitality. Schnase says radical refers to “that which is drastically different from ordinary practices, outside the normal, that which exceeds expectations and goes the second mile” (*Cultivating Fruitfulness: Five Weeks of Prayer and Practice for Congregations*, p. 7).

The most difficult act of radical hospitality is to reach out to those different from us, our enemies, those against whom we are prejudiced, those we don’t like or understand. Herein lays the greater challenge for all of us and for the church. Jonah wasn’t enthused about having the Ninevites repent and turn to God because he didn’t like them and he didn’t want them to be a part of God’s family. Sometimes there are people or groups of people we don’t want in Christ’s family. Sadly, we sometimes never repent of this and fail to reach out. The Israelites who were listening to Moses about welcoming the stranger were surely saying under their breath “Yea, right. If you think I’m going to include that person from that place, then you’re nuts” despite the fact they knew full well the pain of isolation and prejudice.

Schnase says this: **“Practicing hospitality is not launching a membership drive for a civic organization or inviting people to join a club in order to enhance revenue through dues. We invite people into that mysteriously sustaining community that finds its purpose in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”**

Schnase says we may find ourselves saying: “We’re such a friendly church. We do fine with hospitality.” Sometimes the greatest strength of churches and classes and choirs is also their greatest weakness. Church members love each other so much that their lives are so intertwined and their interests so interwoven that church groups become impenetrable to new people. Closeness closes out new

people who feel like outsiders looking in, and those on the inside don't even notice. Church members feel content because their own needs are met.

“Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare, and work toward the purpose of helping others receive what we received in Christ. Hospitality is more than common politeness to newcomers, name tags for greeters, or a few visitor parking places, although these are important. Hospitality is a quality of spiritual initiative, the practice of an active and genuine love, a graciousness unaffected by self-interest, an opening of ourselves and our faith community to receive others. When the spirit of Christ's hospitality pervades a congregation, then every choir, youth ministry, adult Sunday school class, mission team, Bible study, and outreach ministry regularly asks itself, ‘How are we doing at inviting others and supporting newcomers into our part of the church family?’ And, how can we improve?” (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Schnase, p. 20).

Paul, in Romans 12 calls us to present ourselves as living sacrifices. In our daily lives, we are called to see beyond ourselves and to sacrifice for others. One of the ways we live sacrificially is by being radically hospitable and welcoming to strangers.

As you go to school this week, consider who you can reach out to with Christ's love? Who could you sit with at lunch? Who needs help in class? Who is lonely? As you go to work, consider one person you may reach out to with Christlike hospitality. Make a phone call to someone who has no friends. Talk to someone you don't know after church today. Church business will wait. The restaurant lines won't be that bad. Take a few minutes to show hospitality.