

Radical Hospitality

The first in a five part series on Five Practices of a Fruitful Congregation

October 26, 2008

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Romans 15: 1 – 7

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Matthew 13: 1 – 9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

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This morning we are kicking off a five-week sermon series and church-wide initiative based on Bishop Robert Schnase’s book titled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. I hope that you all have already begun to participate in this series by using the devotions that you received this week either by mail or by e mail. The focus was on the first practice in the series – the practice of Radical Hospitality. Susan Williamson wrote the 3 devotions and asked some provocative questions, didn’t you think?

In the first devotion she asked us to remember the very first time that we attended Holy Trinity. Now for some of you, it might be so long ago that it is difficult to remember. For others, your first visit was within the last few months. How did you experience hospitality? Did someone approach you with welcoming words? I’d like to ask you to turn to a neighbor – preferably someone that you don’t know very well – and share what that first visit to Holy Trinity was like for you. Did you experience Radical Hospitality?

Here’s what Bishop Schnase says about Christian hospitality in the live of a congregation. “Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, (include) 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.” (p. 11 *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*) Now for this to become radical, it calls us beyond cordiality or friendliness. We must be willing to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of others.

Let's look at each of the four initiatives and consider how we might grow in our Radical Hospitality at Holy Trinity. The first is to invite people to come to church. Now this doesn't have to be an invitation to worship. It could be an invitation to one of the Monday night study groups, or to stop by at the Pumpkin Patch, or to meet your church friends at next month's Auction, or to the Christmas Concert or the Christmas Eve Family Service. Those of you with children or grandchildren could urge them to invite a friend to Sunday School or to Youth Group or or to Vacation Bible School. If we do not extend the invitation, then we miss the opportunity to offer people a relationship with God and Jesus Christ and with a caring church community.

When our invitations are accepted then Radical Hospitality involves welcome. Do you know that experts claim that 78 to 80 percent of persons visiting a church for the first time will make up their minds in the first 15 minutes whether or not they will return next week. Even before they have heard the choir or the sermon, they have already decided whether or not to attend again next week or try another church.

Too often people in church think that hospitality is someone else's job, to be taken care of by the people with titles such as ushers or the greeters or the pastor. It is when those who are not "obligated" turn around and shake hands and offer words of greeting that people feel welcomed and know that they are in a hospitable place. Now I realize that such behavior will take some of you out of your comfort zones, but that is why it is called *Radical* Hospitality and its necessary for the church to practice such hospitality if it wants to be a vital place that attracts people.

Here's a story that illustrates the point. (p. 86, *Five Practices Leaders Manual*) A teenage boy entered the sanctuary of a church. It was the church to which his parents and kid brother belonged. In fact, they were there every time the door opened! They were there too much. As he slumped down in the chair that was as far away from the altar as possible and pulled his ball cap low on his forehead, he dropped his head into his hands and settled in for a nap. He didn't know why he was there. He could sleep more comfortably in his bed. He didn't want to be there. Church was a drag – a religious institution focused on its own survival and uninterested in people like him.

Just as he was moving into pre-sleep, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the face of a woman he did not know. "Great," he thought, "I must be in her personal seat in the pew. She can have it! I'm going home." But she didn't ask him to move. She simply placed a bag of butterscotch in his hand and said, "I'm so glad you're here this morning. I bought this for you because I heard that you really like butterscotch. I do, too! There aren't many of us around."

He didn't open that bag of butterscotch for a long time. In fact, he hung it on the wall of his bedroom right beside his heavy metal posters, his guitar, and his poems of emptiness and longing. A reminder of grace. A sign of Radical Hospitality.

Years later, just out of his teens, that same young man entered a different church. He was feeling pretty good about being there. He wasn't there for the sermon or music. In fact, if he timed it just right, he would miss most of that. He was there because someone he loved asked him to come for a special day. He awakened early that morning, showered, put on his jeans and a T-shirt, and pulled back his long hair, anchoring it with a ball cap.

As he stood in the narthex, waiting for the service to end so that he could find and greet his loved one, he heard someone speak to him. “Young man.” He turned and extended his hand in greeting. He was surprised when his hand was ignored. He was speechless when the person continued. “Young man, you either need to take off your hat or leave the building.”

The truth of our own humanity is that each of us has the capacity to be the butterscotch lady or the hat man. We have within us the ability to be radically hospitable to those for whom church – or Christianity- is a foreign and strange land, even when their values or thoughts about church are different from our own. We also have within us the ability to withhold hospitality in order to protect what we falsely imagine to be “our own” – our own church, our own class, our own space, our own truth.

That’s why Paul’s words to the Romans are especially fitting for today’s practice. Paul addressed the issue of hospitality, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of those who come with different backgrounds, stories, beliefs and practices. What is his encouragement? He writes: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Yes, in order to practice Radical Hospitality, we must invite, welcome and then include everyone in the life of this church. I appreciate Bishop Schnase’s comment that there are times when a church’s greatest strength can be an obstacle to radical hospitality. The very things we celebrate and take pride in – friendship, intimacy, and love for one another – sometimes can get in the way.

Melissa Baily-Kirk tells a this story about the importance of being inclusive in a sermon that she preached on “Opening the Circle.” Many years ago, my best friend and I were blessed to attend the same church. We had first met during our junior year of high school and ended up in the same city after college graduation. It was awesome! We were so active in our church. We started Sunday School classes, sang in the choir, started a women’s prayer group, organized social events and traveled together on different mission trips. As you can imagine, we were fun to be with and deeply devoted to our church.

Imagine our surprise when one of our friends commented, “You know, sometimes when the two of you are together, there just isn’t any room for anyone else.” Whoa! We had to make some changes. No more inside jokes. We joined separate prayer groups and women’s groups. We committed to do less talking and more listening. We had to make changes in our behaviors and attitudes in order to open the circle to make room for others.

Opening the circle. How might each of us do a better job at opening our circles to include others? Be it a committee or the choir or a study group or even our own circle of friends. How hard it is to get outside our own comfort zones. But if we are going to offer Radical Hospitality here at Holy Trinity, it calls us to change our behaviors and to show signs of inclusion. That’s what the “Circle of 10” and the “Rule of 3” are all about. Greet everyone within 10 feet of you, not just those who you already know and like. And practice of “Rule of 3” after the service ends. During the first 3 minutes after church, seek out someone you do not know, introduce yourself and invite them to the fellowship hall to meet others. Statistics show that it take only 3 minutes for a visitor to leave the church after the service. And by all means wear your nametag. How helpful it is for newcomers to begin to put faces and names together. Without nametags, the task is overwhelming for someone who wants to be included.

Invitation, welcome, inclusion and care – four initiatives that ensure Radical Hospitality. Once a person has discovered a faith community, they need to be cared for and supported in their unique faith development. It is like the planting of the seed in Jesus’ parable that we read this morning. Unless the seed falls on fertile ground, it doesn’t have much of a chance to grow and produce fruit. Newcomers especially need support and care so that they can know God’s love as well as the love of this community. Radial Hospitality calls us to change our behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of others. We must be willing to welcome others as radically as Christ welcomes us.

Last weekend, I witnessed Radical Hospitality at the Extraordinary Ordination Service in Baltimore. Before the service began, a homeless woman walked into the sanctuary at Mt. Vernon Place UMC. She asked one of the greeters what was going on and an explanation was given. She then asked if the worship service would help her because she was mentally and physically sick. The greeter said “Yes” and told her that the service was intended to be a service of healing for those who had experienced oppression and exclusion. Someone then ushered the woman to her seat and sat with her throughout the entire service. When it came time for communion, Rev. Jenna Zirbel and Rev. Annie Britton, the two newly ordained women, consecrated the bread and the cup and proceeded to serve the servers. Immediately the homeless woman jumped up from her seat and went forward to the rail standing next to the line of servers. There, the two new ordinands had their first opportunity to offer pastoral care. The woman told them that she was very hungry and took the half loaf of bread out of Jenna’s hands. She drank deeply from the cup that Annie gave her. Then together Jenna and Annie they put their hands upon her and blessed her. Radical Hospitality. It calls for being open minded, open hearted. It means that we can change what we’ve always done. It is welcoming. It is inclusive. It is caring. May each of us know the blessing of Radical Hospitality and may we be a blessing of Radical Hospitality to others. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.