

Being Radical with Our Hospitality

Frankton – 10/11/15

Scripture: Matthew 22.8-10 from the parable of the wedding feast

Proposition: We practice radical hospitality because so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church.

A scenario at any church might look like this: a young single mom stands awkwardly in the foyer with her toddler. She's looking around at all the people she doesn't know on her first visit to this particular church. An acquaintance at work casually mentioned how she loves the music at her church and invited the single mother to visit. But now this single mom isn't so sure this was a good idea. She is wondering about child care; she is self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one; she is unsure of where the bathroom is and now she's doubting whether this is the right worship service for her, or whether this is even the right church for her. Where should she sit? What is it going to feel like to sit alone with her child? And what if her child starts "acting up" and making too much noise? Yet, she's there because she feels the need or prayer, for some connection to others, and for something to lift her up above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband, and her worries for her child. But now that she's here

Now, imagine what would happen if the people at the church took Jesus' words seriously. They would look at this single mom and the whole bundle of hopes and anxieties, desires and discomforts that she carries with her this morning, and they would think, "This woman is a child of God, and Jesus would want us to treat her as we would treat Jesus if we were here." With that in mind, what would be the quality of the welcome, the efforts to ease the awkwardness? What would be the enthusiasm to help, to serve, to graciously receive and support and encourage? [SLIDE] You see, taking Jesus seriously changes our behavior.

Let's look at Jesus' disciples. At every turn, the disciples seem ready to draw boundaries and distinctions that keep people at a distance from Jesus. They have a thousand reasons to ignore, avoid, and sometimes thwart the approach of people. They even remind Jesus that some of these people are too young, too sick, too sinful, too old, too blind, or too Gentile to deserve his attention. Jesus teaches them: [SLIDE] *...anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.* [MT 18.5] In every instance, Jesus radically challenges the disciples' expectations by overstepping the boundaries the disciples made to invite people in. Hospitality has us seeing the people as Jesus sees them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings before us.

But Jesus' hospitality extends beyond the cordial welcome we offer when someone appears at the threshold of the church and then feel good that we've completed our obligations. Jesus tells a parable about himself, saying: [SLIDE] *And [the king] said to his servants...Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.'* [MT 22.8-9] Following Jesus' example of gathering people into the Body of Christ, inviting them to the banquet of God's gracious love requires intentional focus on those outside the community of faith. Jesus' example of hospitality demands an unceasingly invitational posture that we carry with us into the world of our work and leisure and into the practice of neighborliness and community service. It involves seeing ourselves as sent out by Christ and going out of our way, even at the risk of a sense of awkwardness and

inconvenience, to invite people into some aspect of the church's ministry. Hospitality is prayer, work, habit, practice and initiative for the purpose of Christ.

John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced hospitality in ways so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found their activities offensive. (What church would hold a prom in their building?) Wesley preached to thousands on roadsides and in open fields in order to reach coal miners, field laborers, factory workers, the underclass, and the poorest of the poor. He invited them into community and nurtured in them a strong sense of belonging as he organized his classes (what we today call small groups) for mutual accountability, support, and care. Wesley taught of [SLIDE] God's prevenient grace: the preparing grace that draws people to God before they realize they are being drawn to God.

[SLIDE] I want to remind you that we are in a series of sermons I'm calling "An Excited Church." It's based on Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Principles of Fruitful Congregations*. In his book, Schnase outlines five specific areas that he has seen be effective in growing congregations. These five practices are what this sermon series details: [SLIDE] Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, and Radical Hospitality are the first three. [SLIDE] Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity are the last two. We have adopted these practices. We have our church mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We have our vision: Building God's Community. That's how we live into making disciples. And we believe these five practices are how we are best going to accomplish our mission and vision.

One of the uses of the word 'radical' is to indicate something that is vastly different from the norm. Radical hospitality practices exceed expectations, go the second mile, and take welcoming the stranger to the max. I don't mean wild-eyed, out-of-control, or used car salesman. I do mean that people practicing radical hospitality are offering the absolute utmost of themselves, their creativity, their abilities and their energy to offer the gracious invitation and welcome of Christ to others. Churches that practice radical hospitality are not just friendly and courteous in welcoming strangers; they exhibit a restlessness because they realize that so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church. Let me repeat: [SLIDE] Churches practice radical hospitality because so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church. These churches sense a calling and a responsibility to pray, plan and work hard to invite others, to help them feel welcome and to support them in their faith journeys.

Notice why churches practice radical hospitality: because so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church. Therefore, churches don't practice radical hospitality because they need other folks to fill the empty pews and put money in the collection plate so the church can pay the bills. They don't practice radical hospitality because they need more folks to fill up the committees or sing in the praise team. They don't practice radical hospitality because they fear that their church is dying. Churches practice radical hospitality because they see that so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church. Churches that practice radical hospitality understand how critical it is for people to know Jesus Christ and be a part of his church. They understand that the consequences of not knowing Christ are hell-ish and eternal and they can't stand to think of someone facing those consequences.

You see, people want to know that God loves them, that they are of ultimate value to God, and that their life has significance. People want to know that they are not alone, and that when they face

life's difficulties they are surrounded by a community of grace. People want to know that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic reversal, and the temptations that hurt themselves or others. People want to know about the peace that runs deeper than just an absence of conflict. They want to know about the hope that sustains them even through the most painful periods of grief, and about the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them. People want to know that life is not just having something to live on but also someone to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself, but by giving of oneself. People want to know their sustaining sense of purpose. Churches practice radical hospitality because people want to know these things, not so they can fill the empty sanctuary pews or the empty checkbook

Let's talk specifics in Madison County for just a minute. I have just said that churches practice radical hospitality because they see that so many people do not have a relationship to Jesus Christ or to a church. I want to show you some of the latest figures I have regarding church attendance in Madison County. [SLIDE] Approximately 37% of the people living in Madison County regularly attend worship services on Sunday or their Sabbath. That's better than the national average of 20%, but still nothing to write home about. [SLIDE] If we consider the greater metropolitan area of Frankton to be average, that means that about 1134 of our 1800 local residents do not attend church regularly. The harvest is ripe. If we practice radical hospitality, understanding we do it because those folks need a relationship with Jesus Christ, we can positively affect the lives of 1134 people here in Frankton.

Just imagine what radical hospitality might look like right here in this church. How about in addition to handicapped parking spaces, there are clearly marked parking places for visitors and special parking places for families with small children. How about a staffed greeting station with greeters to answer any questions and as well as to give guests a gift from the church plus brochures about the church and its activities. How about several seats in the worship area with arms on them for seniors (and others) who might need a little extra help just getting up or rocking chairs for people with little ones. How about a church that regularly honors those special people in the community with a sack lunch – volunteer fire fighters, policemen, school teachers, the library staff, city workers, or the folks who serve us at Ricker's or Harvest or Dollar General. Radical hospitality may have its origins in the church building, but it can't remain here. Radical hospitality goes beyond the confines of the church and finds its home in the streets of God's community.

But it all comes back to our asking other people. People have no reluctance telling others where they get their hair cut, who they have fix their car, where they go out to eat, who does their taxes, or what vacation spots they like best. And yet, concerning the most important relationship Christian disciples have – their relationship to God through Christ's church – they feel hesitant to speak out. They don't want to intrude or appear pushy or sound too much like a religious nut. But think of all the church means, all that relationship to God means, the perspective of faith, the understandings of life, the relationships gained, the sense of meaning and connection and contribution experienced through church. Why wouldn't we desire these things for the people we respect and love and for the neighbors and co-workers we share our lives with? We pray to God for those folks. Why not invite them to church so that they have the same kind of relationship to God that we have?

Word of mouth is still the most important form of human communication. And when people talk about congregations as places that make people feel welcome and loved, then the church thrives. The willingness to risk something new creates a buzz and a stir in the community that strengthens participation in all other ministries of the church. Personal responsibility for the task of radical hospitality falls squarely on the shoulders of each person in this room and in this building. As a church, we cannot practice radical hospitality until you, the members of our family, practice radical hospitality. We have to change our mindset from [SLIDE] “Someone should do that” to “I’ll do that.” And when we do, we will be doing exactly what Christ told us to do – loving our neighbors.