

***Radical Hospitality: Welcoming the Guest***  
***Hebrews 13:1-3; Luke 7:36-50***  
***September 14, 2008***

During the summer I took my son to get a new pair of athletic shoes. As long as we were at the store I decided I would get a new pair also. I asked the clerk to try on a specific pair in my size – 5. He came back and told me that there were none in stock. This wasn't a big surprise; it's a tough size to find, let alone in stock. I asked if they had anything similar in size five. He did look but returned empty handed. That was it. As we paid for Jeff's shoes, I asked, "Could you order a pair in size five?" "Yes," he replied, but he didn't go on to say, "Would you like me to order a pair for you?" He lost a sale. I walked a block to the competitor's. I walked in and told the clerk I was looking for a size five walking shoe. She came out with 3 pairs in my size – a minor miracle! She got a sale and earned a return customer. In the retail world they call this customer service, or the lack thereof. In the church we call it hospitality.

How the church greets guests is just as important to our ministry as is the treatment businesses give their customers. In fact, our treatment of guests is likely a reflection of the true quality of our ministry and character. Hospitality has to do with the generous and cordial reception of guests.

Our model for hospitality is of course Jesus. He offered radical hospitality, even to tax collectors and sinners, to the outcast and marginalized. Jesus broke through social conventions to offer the extravagant love of God. In the passage from Luke Simon the Pharisee and Jesus offer very different kinds of treatment to the unnamed woman who crashes Simon's dinner party. Simon is immediately judgmental; Jesus is gracious.

The lesson in hospitality continues, for there is a startling difference in how Simon and the woman treat Jesus. Simon is a respectable Pharisee who is undoubtedly good and honest, as well as curious and open-minded enough to invite Jesus to dinner. The woman is not only a woman, but "a woman of the city." In everyone's estimation she is a "sinner." She crashes Simon's party, uninvited, and breaks the rules about how women and men are to relate to each other in this time and place. And yet it is this woman, not Simon the host, who offers the hospitality appropriate for a guest. Simon neglects to provide water with which to wash Jesus' feet. This is a violation of the most basic customs of hospitality of the day. Not only is it rude; it is an insult. It seems as if Simon is simply interested in what he might get from Jesus in a high level theological conversation. His interest is in himself, not in his guest.

Ironically it is the sinful woman who acts as the perfect hostess. The guests at the banquet are reclining on pillows on the floor, supported by their left arms and eating with their right hands. Their feet would be away from the mat on which the food would have been spread before them. Thus the woman could easily approach Jesus' feet. She brings an alabaster jar of ointment, a sign of her love. Small flasks of alabaster were often used for perfumes. As the woman stands weeping behind Jesus, she begins to wash his dusty feet with her tears. In a spontaneous act, she lets down her hair and begins to wipe the tears from Jesus' feet and anoint them with the perfume. Her act expresses love and gratitude.

Simon scolds Jesus for allowing such scandalous behavior. Jesus responds by pointing out Simon's neglect of hospitality. "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but

she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment” (Luke 7:44b-46). Simon is so engrossed in another’s sins that he overlooks his own. In his place, this unnamed woman acts as host to Simon’s guest.

The letter to Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.” We may find ourselves pleasantly surprised in greeting a guest; we may meet an acquaintance who can make a difference in our lives or even make a lifelong friend. While we appreciate the mutuality of those whom we already know in the community of faith, this is not meant to be a closed circle. There is always meant to be an empty chair for the guest to be welcomed. Bishop Schnase reminds us that there are times when a church’s greatest strength can be an obstacle to radical hospitality. The very things we celebrate – friendship, intimacy, and love for one another – sometimes can get in the way.<sup>i</sup> We can gather in clichés with those whom we know and neglect the newcomer who longs for companionship. We must always be conscious in including space in the circle and in our hearts to embrace the guest.

St. Benedict led a monastic community in northern Italy in the mid-sixteenth century. He instructed his followers to receive any guest as we would receive Christ himself. The porter at the monastery gate was to be chosen for his graciousness and wisdom. When someone knocked the porter would call out, “Thanks be to God,” or “Your blessing please.” The monks offered hospitality not out of a sense of superiority but with a willingness to receive whatever a guest might teach them. “Your blessing please” says, “I am glad you are here; I recognize Christ in you; I am ready to receive what you have to offer. I welcome you to this place to share our life.”<sup>ii</sup>

The initial contact with guests is critical. Studies report that 70 to 80 percent of persons visiting a church for the first time make up their minds in the first fifteen minutes whether or not they will return the next week. Even before they have heard the music or the sermon, they have already decided whether or not to attend again or to try another church.<sup>iii</sup> It’s similar to my experience in purchasing shoes. Based upon a single experience, I won’t darken the door of one store again, but the other will get my business again and again. The initial people we meet and the appearance of our church campus are equally important. An attractive, clean, and safe entrance is critical. A clean well-tended is a priority for parents with young children. The appearance of our physical campus is a reflection of our care for the congregation.

Hospitality is a discipline. It is something that must be practiced over and over again—just like musical instruments and sports. There are some guidelines for helping us be intentional about welcoming guests.

First is the Circle of 10: Each person attending worship is asked to talk with and learn the names of everyone they don’t know within a 10 foot radius of where you are sitting. An easy way to meet someone new is to say, “Hi, I don’t believe we’ve had the opportunity to meet. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. And you are?” If you know you’ve been introduced, but can’t remember a name, you might say, “I’m \_\_\_\_\_. Help me remember your name.”

Nametags help a great deal with such a memory lapse! We have ordered new magnetic nametags that don’t have pins to stick you or your clothing. We’re hoping that they may inspire

us to wear our nametags more frequently, even every Sunday. During vacation I worshiped at my father's church, the South Reno United Methodist Church. As everyone entered they headed to a table where everyone wrote a nametag with their first name. During worship it was so nice to call by name persons who I see once a year and others whom I've never met.

In addition to the Circle of 10, learning the names of those within a 10 foot radius, a second guideline is the Rule of 3: Each of us is asked to talk to people we don't know for the first 3 minutes after worship. Often that is the time period in which newcomers slip out if current members don't greet them immediately.

I have received many positive comments about the gracious hospitality of this congregation from newcomers and visitors. An area of growth for us is a system of intentional follow up with visitors, inviting them to participate in church events. Some churches offer a loaf of fresh baked bread to guests. We are also in need of additional fellowship events like last Sunday's Homecoming Luncheon when we can socialize and have fun together. We have a solid foundation, but it is important never to take hospitality for granted. It is a ministry that belongs to us all.

A teenage boy entered the sanctuary of the church attended by his parents and brother. 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 chair. 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."

The boy 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 had 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 had 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 entryway waiting for the service to end so he could greet his loved one, he heard someone speak to him. "Young man."

He 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."

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 the church and Christianity are foreign and strange lands. We also have 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.<sup>iv</sup>

Let us not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for we will likely find an angel within. May we greet each guest as if they were Jesus Christ himself.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Elizabeth J. Canham, *Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), p. 49.

<sup>iii</sup> Allan R. Bevere, “Radical Hospitality Imitates Christ,” *Five Practices: Leader Manual & Media* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 90.

<sup>iv</sup> Melissa Bailey-Kirk, “Opening the Circle,” *ibid*, p. 86.

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