

Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”

I. The Practice of Radical Hospitality

Matthew 18:1-14; Romans 15:1-7

January 14, 2018

We begin a six-week sermon series today. This series is based on a book by Robert Schnase, a Methodist Pastor and Bishop. His book proposes that vitality and fruitful ministries in congregations are based on five specific practices exercised intentionally in those communities. These five practices are: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity.

I believe an interim period is an ideal time for a congregation to examine ways it can become more vital as a community of faith, and more fruitful in its ministry as servants of God to the world. It is also an excellent time to imagine new ways of being church and providing a vibrant witness to God’s love and mercy and justice.

What you hear and see in this series likely will be familiar to you, because you already practice these in various ways. What may be surprising is the extent to which an intentional and consistent implementation of these concepts can impact this congregation and this community for good. And what may be challenging will be letting go of false assumptions about ourselves, about other people, and about the faith.

Each week in this series, we will focus on one of these practices. The sixth week we will draw all of this together into some possibilities for Unity. This week our focus is on the practice of radical hospitality.

Our scripture passages guiding our thinking this morning speak about welcoming, and the deep significance that such an act has. The welcome from one person to another is a primary understanding of hospitality. The Apostle Paul indicates that the touchstone and pattern of all Christian welcome of others is “as Christ has welcomed you.”

Paul did not write this because it is easy to get along with others. As a matter of fact Paul’s instructions come at the end of contentious arguments over differing values and practices among the Christians community of faith. Paul reminds them: God did not require us to do something, to become something different than we are prior to being welcomed into the family. The ministry of Jesus was not to the well but to the sick, to the sinful, to those unwelcome in most other situations. Our Lord’s ministry was full of grace and love, not condemnation and conditional acceptance. And Paul says, “Welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you.”

Paul’s message is about the **quality** of welcome to which the Christian community must aspire.

The Gospel lesson from Matthew addresses the issue of **to whom** the Christian community is to focus its welcome.

When the disciples ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” they expect the answer to be the powerful, the wealthy, persons of accomplishment and status. Are not they the ones who should be targeted for a warm welcome? Won’t they enhance the quality of our community, the budget, and the standing of the church?

Yet Jesus takes a child, vulnerable and dependent, unaccomplished and unproductive. He says, “This is what kingdom residents will look like. Recruit people like this. Whoever welcomes such a humble child in my name welcomes me.”

According to Jesus, the person to be welcomed by the Christian community **must include** the very least and the most humble. So the standards of hospitality for the church are these: welcoming others in the same manner as Christ has accepted us, and welcoming the lowliest.

Much of the New Testament was written because congregations failed to meet these standards. In Paul’s letters to Corinth, he admonished the congregation because at gatherings some people went hungry because others overindulged themselves. In James, the writer condemned the church’s practice of seating the rich in places of honor while segregating the poor in the

least desirable places. Leaders of the early church believed generous hospitality for all demonstrated the Gospel message of Jesus and what Jesus required of them.

Today hospitality remains part and parcel of the Gospel proclamation and God's continuing work in the world. In the guiding principles of the Presbyterian Church you will find this remarkable statement: "A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church. No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel." Those are unambiguous words for Presbyterians in understanding the role of welcome. What makes hospitality "radical" are the standards by which the church extends its welcome: as Christ welcomes us, and to all including the most humble.

Unity Presbyterian Church values hospitality to such a degree that it included a story of hospitality in its stained glass windows. Abraham is welcoming travelers, who it turned out were messengers from God.

The issue must never be about the church's comfort or convenience. And it must not be about increasing the congregation's numbers or having a bigger budget.

It is always about the sensitivity and commitment we have to those who may be outside our congregation at the moment.

When I think about hospitality and welcoming others, the idea of greeting comes to mind. A warm “Hello!” a handshake or a hug, with words such as “How are you?” are standard practice. It is quite the failure of the church when visitors leave feeling ignored. Yet there is one thing worse than being invisible: it is the sense of feeling used, manipulated for other people’s purposes.

Hospitality always focuses on the guests’ needs. When I think of gracious hospitality, this is what comes to my mind. I imagine a host or hostess greeting me at the door as soon as I enter. He or she takes my coat, engages me in conversation, escorts me to where other people are gathering. I am introduced to those present, and the host or hostess makes certain I have a drink.

In the days of the Bible in Near Eastern culture, hospitality always included a meal, a place to stay, and security for travelers. The story of the Good Samaritan was about someone who practiced deep, radical hospitality in the care of a stranger.

A while back, my wife and I were shopping. We went to a hardware store seeking a specific item. We couldn’t find it so we looked for employee to help us. Finally we located one: he was sitting at a desk working on a

computer. On our approach, he didn't look up from the screen. I interrupted him and inquired about the item we wanted. He said, "If we have anything like that it will be back that way, but I don't think it's what you want." He then went back to his computer screen.

Mary and I looked at each other. The store was large and the direction he pointed was imprecise. Employees at this store are sales people so I assumed his primary job was not computer entry. We didn't find this interaction helpful and we left without what we needed.

We went to another location of the same name-brand store. A woman came up to us and greeted us when we entered. She asked if she could help. When we told her what we wanted, she walked with us over to the area where the item was located, and then she asked if that was what we needed. She assisted us in making the right choice for our application. After we decided on the item, she asked what else we might need.

The two stores were the same company: the quality and selection of the merchandise were identical. Guess which store I will go back to?

I know this does not sound like hospitality: it sounds like good business. Do you know how rare such good business practices are in the retail world today?

Our second interaction made us feel attended to, important, the very reason that employee was there. We did not perceive our presence as an imposition or interruption. Our needs were addressed, we were helped, and in the process an atmosphere of care and hospitality were created.

The church is not in the sales business. Yet Jesus says we are in the hospitality business. And that business is not taking care of the church's needs but the needs of others.

It is important to remember that when people are new to a place or community, they know little about the things we old timers know. A person asks for directions. A long-term resident of the town says, "Go two blocks and turn where the Texaco station used to be; then go on to the old Palmer place, veer left, and you can't miss it. There's a tiny sign behind the bushes if you're not sure."

We laugh about it, and then do exactly the same thing! Unity Presbyterian Church is a large facility that can be confusing for newcomers. It would be instructive for members of this congregation to tour the facility and church grounds to determine the challenges that newcomers or the disabled or single parents might encounter.

It is not rocket science. If people are in the dark, turn on a light! That is hospitality in its most basic form. **What makes hospitality radical is the attention we pay to the needs of one person or one family and the extent to which we go in order to engage others in the ministry of Jesus Christ.**

I have found that a major task facing every congregation is to reduce or eliminate the barriers that keep people from participating. Whether it is worship or Sunday School or Bible studies, or mission involvement, or caring for each other.

What are the barriers or impediments in this congregation to people feeling included and engaged in the body of Christ? And to what extent does this congregation believe it is our responsibility to remove such barriers?

As part of our commitment to the practice of radical hospitality, I encourage you ask these questions and to examine with the eyes of a visitor every aspect of our mission and program and facility.

Hospitality is one of the great opportunities within the grasp of this congregation. You already do it ~ I know, because I have experienced it myself in your midst and I have heard other people report the warmth of this congregation. Ministries such as Family Promise embody hospitality in concrete ways.

The challenge for us is making radical hospitality consistent by every member of the congregation. Even if you are not assigned greeter or usher responsibilities on a Sunday, you can still make people feel welcome. This requires each of us to grow into the kind of person Jesus Christ calls us to be, to welcome one another as Jesus has welcomed us.

This is a worthy goal and calling for every member of this congregation: to make certain that every person we encounter, whether they walk through the church doors to worship or they merely pass us on the street, that they experience the welcome of Jesus Christ. Are you and I up to that challenge?

Mark E. Diehl
Unity Presbyterian Church
Fort Mill, SC