
RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Is anyone interested in talking about prejudice and racism this morning? How about same-sex marriage?

- My guess is that few—probably very few—want to talk about these things...here, anyway.
- Because I suspect many of you *have* been talking about them—with family, friends, co-workers, on Facebook...just not at church.
 - Yet these are hard, uncomfortable issues, and while we like to think of church as a place where there is no controversy or difficult conversations, these things are happening in our world and perhaps the best place to talk about them is at church.

Now, before you consider getting up to leave, let me tell you that we have been talking about these things all along—just not in the more specific and overt ways you may discuss them elsewhere.

- And while I don't believe that church is a place where you are to be told what to think or how to vote,
 - it should be the place where we take the task of developing ourselves as Christian disciples seriously enough to offer perspectives on how the Scriptures and our faith help us navigate in this very challenging world.
- I'm bringing this up—not simply because there are huge issues in the news right now that many people are talking about,
 - but also—and more importantly—because the Gospel reading for today has a lot to tell us about what it means to be disciples:
 - disciples in a challenging, difficult, confusing, and at times painful world,
 - that is also, at the same time a place of beauty and wonder and deeply loved by our GOD.

This Gospel passage talks about a central issue for Christians: hospitality.

- I've written and talked about hospitality a lot.
- And I think this passage invites us to look at hospitality more deeply and from some different perspectives than we usually do.
 - But let's begin where we usually start and end: with the topic of offering hospitality.

Have you ever noticed that most, if not all, of our conversations around hospitality are rather one-sided?

- That is, we tend to talk about *our* hospitality, *our* nature, *our* welcome as a gift that we offer to others.

When I teach congregations about how to welcome guests (not visitors, but guests) to their church, they will quickly tell me that they already are a very "friendly" congregation—implying that they are very hospitable—very good at offering hospitality.

- Yet while they truly believe this about themselves, what they are describing is how they treat each other.
- They are very friendly with each other, and think, therefore, that they are friendly to guests, which may not be the actual experience of the guest.
 - But the welcome they extend may also contain messages, spoken or implied, that are not so hospitable—like:
 - "We're glad you're here, but you can't receive the sacrament of the LORD's Table," or
 - "Your family is welcome here, but your children aren't welcome in worship service."

Yet here we have JESUS, today, in HIS own hometown, yet not being welcomed by HIS neighbors and friends.

- Why the disdain? Why the dismissal?

Perhaps what is going on here has to do with greater priority to expectations than to hospitality.

- In v. 4, JESUS identifies HIMSELF as a prophet, albeit one without honor in their eyes.
 - JESUS isn't what they expect in a prophet, much less the MESSIAH.
 - The problem isn't that JESUS is different from them—HE is one of them.
 - The problem is that HE is different from what they think, what they expect, a prophet *should* be.
- So, rather than revising their expectations for the sake of hospitality and accepting what HE has to offer—what GOD has to offer—they hang on to their perceptions about the world and people and themselves...and dismiss JESUS.

Aren't we, too often, tempted to do the same, though;

- to reduce someone who challenges us to a single attribute—whether skin color, or cultural heritage, or orientation, or religious practices, or political affiliation—so that we can feel comfortable dismissing them
 - and thereby fail to receive the whole of the person GOD has created and redeemed and offered to us as a gift?

Which leads me to suggest another perspective on hospitality that presents itself in the second part of this Gospel narrative—that of needing hospitality.

- When was the last time you accepted hospitality? Relied on hospitality?
 - Because it is one thing to be invited to dinner.
 - It's another thing to wonder from where dinner will come.

When JESUS sent out HIS disciples to preach and to teach and to heal, HE told them to take nothing with them.

- Apparently, JESUS is trying to teach them that discipleship demands dependence on hospitality
 - and this dependence is not just on offering it, but perhaps even more so on receiving it. And needing it? (And honestly, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that.)

Needing hospitality requires vulnerability and letting go.

- It necessitates giving up control and becoming comfortable with risk.
 - Because needing hospitality anticipates rejection at every turn, but gives witness to ultimate trust in GOD's love regardless.

Hospitality was indispensable in the ancient world and compared to today, it was radical.

- There were few restaurants or hotels along one's journey.
- Little travel was possible without the assumption and expectation of hospitality:
 - food left unharvested from the edges of fields along the roads that passersby could pluck and eat;
 - people who would see you setting up to sleep in the town square and invite you to stay in their home even if they didn't know you.
- The mission to the Gentiles would not have happened without counting on the hospitality of others to host a missionary, perhaps for years at a time.

Radical hospitality is not just having someone over for a nice meal.

Radical hospitality is not just letting someone in for a spell.

- Gospel hospitality is genuine and ongoing, and that is radical because there is no other kind of hospitality.
 - You are not hospitable sometimes: you either are hospitable or you aren't.
 - If you extend welcome to some but not to others, don't claim that you are hospitable.

In 2015, when Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, NC opened its doors and their Bible study to an unknown white man, they were showing hospitality.

- And when they spoke words of forgiveness to this man accused of shooting their friends and family, they were being radically hospitable.

Are you willing to be part of showing that kind of mercy?

Are you willing to receive that kind of hospitality?

The story of the Good Samaritan is one of radical hospitality.

- But the unspoken perspective of the story of the Good Samaritan is not that one who was considered an outcast by many was the one who extended hospitality.
 - It is whether the wounded man by the side of the road really wanted assistance from the Samaritan.
 - Would we rather die than have to be welcomed by “one of them?”
 - Would we rather die than have to accept hospitality from “one of those people?”
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Questions like these push us to think about developing hospitality.

It is difficult to talk about prejudice and racism because it hits too close to home.

- Some bear the scars of prejudice—not just of race, but also of gender, age, culture, or religion.
 - Others fear being accused of prejudice.
 - Shootings of innocent people challenge us to evaluate our feelings and our focus on hospitality to those who have or wish to have access to guns.
 - The burning of black churches or Jewish synagogues forces us to ask questions about racism in our country and in our personal perceptions, and if and how we might change a world that allows or at least ignores such issues.
 - Calls to change or remove symbols that are important for others encourage us to examine those symbols that are important for us.
 - Changing rules that touch closely to our religious beliefs, like who can marry or who can be a leader in the church, unsettle us and lead us to wonder if our views are incorrect and if not, how to stand up for them.
 - It is frightening to contemplate changing moral values in our country or, more accurately, to face our own sense of what is moral and true.
 - And yet, deep down, we know that this is what GOD calls us to do.
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A theology of hospitality requires a reassessment of everything: -

- practices, language, symbols,
- rituals, flags, emblems,
- confessions, sacraments, rulings,
- assumptions about where we think power is located, and beliefs about where it should be located.
- It is hard and uncomfortable to be reminded that every time we draw a line between who is in and who is out, we are very likely to find JESUS on the other side.

Yet the steps we may take—steps most of us actually want to take—toward greater acceptance and hospitality will result in uncomfortable moments and difficult conversations.

- But it’s worth it.
- It’s worth it because we don’t walk this path alone.
 - We have the help and courage of JESUS, the ONE who sends disciples out equipped with the power to face down the unclean spirits of prejudice and racism in whatever form they appear.
 - And we take those steps together because that’s what it means to be the body of CHRIST.

This week we celebrated Independence Day in America.

- It is important for us that we recognize from what it is that we claim that independence.
 - It is independence from a government that unjustly tried to control our rights as human beings.
 - It is independence to be self-governing as a nation.
 - It is independence to choose what freedoms and values are important to us and then to be able to stand up for them without fear of persecution.
- But it is important for us that we also recognize what that independence is not.
 - It is not independence for ourselves without thought for how our decisions and actions will affect others.
 - It is not independence to claim rights for some but not for others.
 - It is not independence to hold positions of power at the expense of others though we believe them to be equally created in the eyes of GOD.
- We can celebrate independence, but we can only do so in recognition of our interdependence.
 - We are connected to others in our community, nation, and world—economically, politically, socially, and in a myriad of other ways.

Perhaps the independence we need to celebrate is that we are independent from having to go it alone;

- the idea that we can and have to rely only on ourselves and those just like us;
- the thought that we cannot grow or change without losing something dear to us.

JESUS is still sending out disciples, still inviting us to do great things together, still calling us to discover independence through interdependence, and strength through vulnerability.

- We are deeply and unavoidably connected to each other.
 - Thus hospitality—radical hospitality—the hospitality we are called to offer, and to receive, and to acknowledge that we need, becomes a hallmark of our discipleship.

Discipleship, as it turns out, is not just about learning from and following another.

- It is taking on the role and authority of the ONE you follow.
 - We are not just observers of what happens around us;
 - we are active participants in what GOD has already given:
 - a love that shows mercy, no matter what, no matter who.
 - And that, Christians, is radical hospitality.