

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida
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6/26/05

Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSV)

[40] "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. [41] Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; [42] and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

RADICAL HOSPITALITY

The title of my sermon is "Radical Hospitality." I do admit that I come up with some strange titles from time to time! In the case of this morning's service, the words don't seem to go together.

The word "radical" brings to mind wild-eyed terrorists or some bizarre religious group teetering on the fringe of society. That's radical. On the other hand, in my mind at least, the word "hospitality" conjures up images of Julia Childs whipping up a pumpkin pie or dear old mom breaking out her Betty Crocker cookbook to prepare a delicious meal for the family and friends.

Hospitality just doesn't seem like a radical topic. Indeed, you might even say that is quite mundane ... unless it is used by Jesus as a description of how the kingdom of God comes.

Several weeks ago I talked about what scholars called the "radical table fellowship" of Jesus.

The teachings of Jesus were in many ways not all that different from the other rabbis of the day. What made Jesus different was who he claimed to be (the Son of God) and what he did. He taught as one who had authority, he healed the sick, he forgave sins and he ate with sinners and tax collectors.

Those last two characteristics were the ones that really got him into trouble. People don't mind at all if you bring them the promise of healing and an interesting talk. Even today many on the lecture circuit are well paid for their ability to do just that.

But, when you start preaching that we should forgive our enemies, when you start "hanging" with and even sharing meals with the "boyz in the hood" then eyebrows begin to rise and the speaking money dries up. In the hands of Jesus even hospitality becomes a radical word.

AVOIDING THE STRANGER

If you watch the evening news, chances are that you are not so excited about showing hospitality toward the stranger. We learn on TV that the stranger can be dangerous.

That's why we have communities that are gated and have high walls. We have alarms on our homes and cars. We are afraid to make eye contact with the people we pass on the street.

In our world, the stranger has become an enemy to be avoided at all costs.

We really do live in a dangerous world. But, are higher walls the answer? The high walls that keep the stranger out also keep us isolated from the blessings that could be ours in Christ Jesus as we dare to welcome the stranger.

Showing hospitality toward the stranger does involve risk. If we welcome someone into our life, there is always the possibility that our offer of hospitality will be misused in some way.

But, that is the cost that we as followers of Jesus Christ must be willing to pay. Again, we go back to the basic call of discipleship. We must be willing to take up a cross and follow Jesus. We must be willing to embrace and forgive others as he has embraced and forgiven us.

This is Christian hospitality.

It is not just about having fellowship with those of like mind. It is about welcoming those who are different, those prophets who might have a difficult word to hear.

THEIR YOUTH

Jerry Goebel told of getting fired from his job as a youth minister. The leaders of the church said it was because the youth he was bringing into the church weren't "their" youth.

The people who attended his church were from the suburbs. They drove into town on Sunday. But, the church was located in a neighborhood that was 84% Latino. Those were the kids that this pastor was able to bring in.

He had an after school program that attracted over a hundred young people every day. Many of the youth he was able to reach were kids at risk. His multiple outreaches to young people who were in gangs brought attention from the local and even the national press. They were even able to win a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

But, Jerry got fired because the kids he brought in were not "their" kids.

He said that ironically the average age of that congregation was seventy-six so "their" kids would have been in their forties. It became obvious that when they talked about "their" kids, they meant that the kids that he was bringing into the building were not their kind of kids. Their kids weren't brown kids, poor kids, or troubled kids.

Do you see how dangerous it is to practice the radical hospitality of Jesus? It can get you fired from your job or much, much worse.

Who would have ever thought that a little after school basketball could bring such a harsh reaction? Who would have ever thought that giving someone a cookie could prove to be a controversial decision?

But, I've heard the same story over and over again. The world tells us, "You are who you eat with. Be careful of the company you keep. Those people might not be our kind of people."

But, Jesus tells us, "Eat with everyone. Welcome everyone into your life. Break all the rules of polite society. In fact, my kingdom is based upon such rule breaking."

And so we see that hospitality becomes a tool for bringing in the kingdom of God. God has chosen to bring in the Kingdom one cookie at a time. Even the smallest act of kindness can make a huge difference in the kingdom of God.

A CUP OF COLD WATER

According to our passage for today, there is a reward for those who dare to even give a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus.

Actually, getting a cup of cold water was not such an easy thing to do in Jesus' day. Obtaining a cool drink of water involved lowering a jar deep into a well and dragging it to the surface. This work was not easy to accomplish.

Remember the story of the woman at the well? When Jesus was traveling through Samaria, he asked a woman for a drink of cool water. She was not about to help him out.

Drawing water from the well was hard work, and besides that Jesus was a Jew. What right did he have even to be talking to a Samaritan woman? And she said as much. She thought that Jesus was of little importance, just another Jewish man who wanted to cause her trouble.

Little did she know. This seemingly unimpressive man by the well was none other than the Son of God, the one who could give her living water, water that would bring her life eternal.

We might imagine being hospitable toward someone of importance. In fact most of the time we fall all over ourselves to honor those who have clout.

Do you remember when the candidates for President made it a point to stop in and have dinner with some regular working folks? Of course it was just a political photo opportunity. But, do you think that the people who welcomed these candidates for the presidency into their homes took the visit lightly?

I bet they worked for days to make sure that everything was just right for that special visit. Hospitality becomes very important when the guest is special.

LITTLE ONES

But, we are often not so anxious to honor the "little ones" who come our way. "Little ones" in this case refers to the disciples of Jesus who are spreading the gospel. But, the word was also used in reference to children, and it symbolized a key difference between the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus.

We need to remember that in Jesus' day children were not doted on as they are in our society. Until the children were able to carry their own weight by working, they were thought to be liabilities. They were on the lowest rung of society's ladder.

You'll remember that when the people brought the children to Jesus so that he might bless them, his disciples wanted to send the children away. In the eyes of the disciples children were a bother for an important man like Jesus.

But, Jesus told his disciples to bring the children closer. In contrast to everyone else in his society, Jesus emphasized the importance of children and others who were the most vulnerable. How we treat the weakest members of our community is a good barometer of what we really believe.

ANGELS AMONG US?

In fact, the importance of serving the vulnerable stranger is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. Serving the stranger in God's name was always done with a sense of religious wonder and expectation. The presence of God could be encountered in the presence of a stranger.

For example, in Hebrews 13:2 we read, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Our passage for today focuses on those who have the courage to care for the Disciples of Christ. Those who are hospitable to the Disciples of Christ will receive a reward. When they care for the disciples it is as if they have cared for Jesus himself.

In the Old Testament when God's prophet was received with hospitality by someone, that hospitable person was often rewarded.

For example, in the Old Testament we read the story of the widow of Zarephath. This poor widow fully expected that she and her son would soon die of hunger during a time of famine.

But, despite her desperate situation, she eventually showed hospitality toward God's prophet, Elijah. She honored Elijah's request for a morsel of bread, and afterwards Elijah invoked God's promise of a reward. Her food supply would not fail.

The Bible tells us that her "jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail." No more trips to the grocery store for the widow. God provided all that she needed. (1 Kings 17:8-24).

I think Jesus had stories like this one in mind when he talked about the importance of putting out the welcome mat for the prophet who comes in the name of the Lord. There would be a reward for those who welcomed the prophet.

And since we don't know who the prophet might be or when the prophet might come, perhaps we should never take the welcome mat inside. Jesus said that when we serve the least in our society, we are in fact serving him. (Matthew 25:40)

Indeed, I think it would not be too much to say that bringing a cup of cold water to the vulnerable is the mission of the church. It is our reason for existence.

DISTRACTED FROM THE MISSION

And yet we are so easily distracted from our Savior's goal.

The call to radical hospitality is simple, but it is also quite challenging. A community based upon forgiveness and concern for the least does not fit in with what many in our society believe and (unfortunately) what many in the church believe as well.

And so instead of responding positively to the challenging yet simple message of Jesus, we begin to focus on other things that are not so important. We major in minors. Instead of focusing on the mission we become a distraction from the mission.

Have you ever noticed how the whole church can become absolutely obsessed with issues that are not that important? It seems to me that just a few headstrong people can distract us from the mission of the Kingdom. The issues will vary. It might be a very fine point in theology, the type of music we play or even the color of the carpet in the sanctuary.

But, one thing remains the same. These issues that seem so important at the time often serve as a distraction from what is really important in the Kingdom that Jesus brings.

The trouble with much of what we do and talk about in the church is that it seems so far removed from the simple hospitality advocated by Jesus. We have such big plans and bold dreams that we sometimes forget about people and the small acts of concern that mean so much.

Indeed, I think a case could be made that these so called "small" acts are really quite large in God's eyes because they reflect what the kingdom of God is all about.

Let's evaluate what we do in the church in this way. If what we are doing in the church keeps us from providing aid for the vulnerable, it is a distraction from the main mission of the church. More than that, this side track may even keep us from experiencing the hidden presence of Christ in the one who has a need.

SALVATION AND HOSPITALITY

When you think about it, salvation itself was born out of an act of hospitality. The Bible tells us that we were strangers to the promises of God. But, God in Christ reached out to us. God's love encircled us and now we are included as an adopted part of God's family. (See Ephesians 2:12-22)

If God has made us a part of His family, should we not in turn offer the same sort of hospitality to others?

That was the thinking of God's People, the Jews. They thought that it was important to welcome strangers because they themselves were strangers, captives in the land of Egypt. Their salvation from that situation as a people prompted them to have a heart for the stranger.

I think that the Bible clearly teaches that hospitality is not just a social nicety but a concrete way of celebrating the salvation we have received from the Lord. It is a way to give thanks for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

ENTERTAINING VERSUS HOSPITALITY

Christian hospitality is different from entertaining. When we use the word hospitality, we often think of a host who wants to put his or her best foot forward. The house must be spotless. The food must be delicious and plentiful. The host must appear relaxed and good-natured.

But, notice that the entertaining host does all this to make himself or herself look good in the eyes of others. The emphasis is not really upon what the guests want or need but upon what will they think of the host.

Hospitality, on the other hand, is all about the needs of the guest. Their needs, be it a place to stay, something to eat or just a listening ear, are always at the forefront when it comes to Christian hospitality.

In this regard hospitality can (and often does) happen in a messy home as two people share a cup of coffee. Christian hospitality can occur when the guest and the host are doing chores together.

To put it another way, being hospitable means making people feel at home. It is caring about the people who come your way for who they are and not for how you can use them to achieve your goals. To practice hospitality is to bestow a kind of grace upon a person.

This is much harder to accomplish than you might imagine. We all have agendas, things we want to do and goals we need to achieve. This is not bad in and of itself.

But, sometimes our goals get in the way of hearing, really hearing what the other person needs to tell us. I have made it a rule to immediately drop all my "agenda" items if I sense a personal need in the person to whom I'm talking.

THE VOW OF HOSPITALITY

The late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest, told of going to a monastery for a retreat where the monks observed a vow of silence. But, he was delayed because of other commitments and was late getting to the monastery on a miserable, rainy night.

Henri rang the doorbell well after bedtime and was met at the door by one of the brothers who warmly greeted him, took his wet coat and brought him to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

As they chatted late into the night, Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat, but he knew this monk was supposed to observe his vow of silence. So he asked finally, "Why are you willing to talk with me?"

The monk replied that of all the rules of the Christian faith there is none higher than the one which requires us to be hospitable.

That might be a good rule for us to remember. We might not observe a vow of silence or live in a monastery, but we have our own rules, things that we do religiously. But nothing should take precedence over the call to welcome others in the name of Jesus Christ.

To be a disciple of Christ means taking the risk of letting another person become a part of our lives. It means being vulnerable enough to open the door to our heart and allow others to see us as we really are, sinners without hope except for the grace of God. It is that disclosure that allows others to really come home.

Won't you welcome someone in the name of Christ this week?

A cup of cold water seems like such a small thing. But, is it really so small? Water is a symbol of life, a necessity. We can't live without it. For those of us who cut grass in the hot Florida sun, it is a most precious gift.

And for those of us who are thirsty for the Spirit of Christ, it quenches an eternal need. The reward for such a gift might be much greater than we could ever imagine. Amen.

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