

Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”

I. The Practice of Radical Hospitality

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

April 26, 2020

We begin a sermon series today 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 intentionally implemented and exercised. 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 and explore ways of becoming a more vital community of faith, and more fruitful for its service to God and 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. Our present circumstances demand new ways of being church.

What you hear and see in this series will be familiar to you, because you practice these already. 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 the challenge to adopting them will be letting go of false

assumptions about ourselves, about other people, and about the faith.

We will focus on one practice from this book each week. And will draw together some possibilities for Grosse Pointe Memorial based on these insights.

The scripture passages guiding our thinking this morning speak about welcome, 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 of us specific behavior, to change who we are in order to be welcomed into the family. The ministry of Jesus was not to the well but to the sick, to those shunned by society, 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 status and accomplishment. Are not they the ones who should be targeted for a warm welcome? They will enhance the reputation of our community and increase the budget!

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. 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 castigated the congregation because some people went hungry when they gathered while others overindulged themselves. In the book of James, the writer condemned the seating the rich in places of honor at church while segregating the poor in the least desirable places. Leaders of the early Christian

church believed generous hospitality for all demonstrated the Gospel message of Jesus.

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 we 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 strong words. 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.

The issue cannot be about our comfort or convenience as the church. It must not be about increasing the congregation's numbers or having a bigger budget. Instead the focus must reflect sensitivity and commitment to those outside the congregation.

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. In a time of social distancing, we may need to rethink the hug and handshake.

It is quite the failure of the church when visitors to services or events leave feeling ignored. Yet there is one thing worse than being invisible: it is the feeling of being used or manipulated by others.

Hospitality 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 refreshments.

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 in a place of danger.

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 someone: he was sitting at a desk working on a computer. As we approach him, 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. I knew that employees at this store were involved with sales so I assumed his primary job was not computer entry. His interaction with us was unhelpful and we left without finding what we needed.

We went to another location of the same name-brand store. A woman came up to us as soon as we entered, greeting us and asking 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 met our need. 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 represented the same exact company: the quality and selection of the merchandise were identical. Guess which store I will go back to? I know this may not sound like hospitality: it sounds like good business. Do you know how rare such good business practices are in the retail world today?

The interaction at the second location made us feel attended to: we were the very reason that employee was there. We did not perceive our presence as an imposition or interruption. Our needs were addressed 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 the business of the church is addressing the needs of others, not merely taking care of the church's needs.

It is important to remember that when people are new to a place or in a community, their knowledge is limited compared to what the old timers know. A person asks for directions. A long-time 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. A tiny sign is behind the bushes if you look hard."

We laugh about it, and then do exactly the same thing! Grosse Pointe Memorial 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 in finding the locations they may need.

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 them 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. I have been amazed at how this congregation, while social distancing, has adapted to staying in touch with each other in spite of the challenges.

What are the barriers or impediments to people feeling included and engaged in the body of Christ here? Does this congregation believe it is our responsibility to remove those 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 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 others report the warmth of this church.

The challenge for us is making radical hospitality consistent by every member of the congregation. 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. We can make certain that every person we encounter, entering the church or passing by on the street, that every person experiences the welcome of Jesus Christ.

Mark E. Diehl, Grosse Pointe Memorial Church, Grosse Pointe Farms, MI