

## **Radical Hospitality**

### Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Part 1

Romans 15:1-7; Matthew 25:34-40

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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#### I

There is a story about a county extension agent who had to go to a farm to talk with the farmer about a matter of county business.

Driving up the gravel road leading to the farmhouse, he encountered signs that said things like:

“Trespassers will be shot,”

“Beware of the Dog,”

“Keep Out...This Means You!”

Arriving at the door, the extension agent was a little nervous about how he would be greeted. But the farmer greeted him with a smile and warmly invited him into the house.

When the agent was ready to leave, the farmer said to him in a wistful sort of way:  
“Come and see me again sometime. I don’t get many visitors up this way.”

Well, no wonder!

The signs at the entrance to the farm did not exactly indicate that a visitor would be welcomed with warmth and hospitality.

#### II

That farmer reminds me of some churches I’ve known.

They say they want to grow;

they say they would like to have new people join;  
they say they are happy to have visitors come to church.

But there are no visible signs to indicate that desire.

Like the lonely farmer, some churches put up non-verbal signals that indicate visitors aren't really welcome.

Not speaking to a newcomer...

only saying hello and not following up with introductions to others...

not demonstrating a sincere interest in the person...

failing to show a guest around the building...

or one of the classic examples—

a visitor is seated in a pew when a long-term member comes in and says,

*“Excuse me, but you’re sitting in my pew.”*

These are all ways of communicating an unwelcoming, indifferent attitude.

And churches with those behaviors wonder why they are in decline.

Fruitful churches, on the other hand, display the signs of growth and health.

They practice the strategies that lead to fruitful ministry.

Over the last nine years, thanks to Robert Schnase’s book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, thousands of churches across the land have begun focusing on the strategies and practices that lead to fruitfulness in ministry.

Some of those churches are large and some of them are small;

some are urban,

some are suburban,

some are small town and rural.

Whatever the context, faithful, fruitful churches exhibit some of the same characteristics.

Starting today and for the next four Sundays we will consider the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations as we evaluate our ministry here at First Presbyterian Church.

Let me say at the outset that I think we are already excellent in many ways.

For a small congregation, we have done some amazing things

We have a warm, caring, and nurturing spirit of fellowship in our midst.

We are a creative, risk-taking church that has been a leader in the community over many years.

We are doing many positive things to serve Christ in our community.

But every now and then...we need to pause and take stock of where we are.

Every now and then...the vision needs to be recast.

Every now and then...we need to stop and remind ourselves of **who** we are,  
**whose** we are,  
 and **what it is we are called to be about.**

We need to think about ways we can improve and be even stronger at providing “a ministry which will lead people to strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ and reach out with God’s love.”

### III

So today our theme is the first of the five practices: **hospitality.**

When I think about hospitality, I imagine a host or hostess at a home who greets you at the door,  
 takes your coat,  
 engages you in conversation,

takes you to where people are gathering,  
introduces you to those who are present,  
and makes sure you have everything you need.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines hospitality as:

1. *The friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers.*
2. *The quality or disposition of receiving and treating guests and strangers in a warm, friendly, generous way.*

That's not far from the meaning of hospitality in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated "hospitality" literally means "love of strangers."

Hospitality is a virtue that is both commanded and commended throughout Scripture.

In the Old Testament, it was specifically commanded by God. Leviticus 19:33-34:

*"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."*

In Genesis 18 we read of Abraham's humble and generous display of hospitality to three strangers.

Wealthy and aged, Abraham could have called on one of his many servants to tend to the three unannounced visitors.

Yet Abraham personally made every effort to see that the needs of the guests were met.

As it turned out, he had entertained the Lord and two angels (Genesis 18:1-8).

Turning to the New Testament, we see that during his public ministry, Jesus and his disciples depended entirely on the hospitality of others as they ministered from town to town (Matthew 10:9-10).

Likewise, the early Christians also depended on and received hospitality from others (Acts 2:44-45; 28:7).

In fact, travelers in ancient times depended heavily on the hospitality of strangers, as travel could be dangerous, there were very few inns, and poorer Christians could not afford to stay at them, anyway.

This generous provision to strangers also included opening one's home for church services, as did Lydia in Acts 16:11-15.

Hospitality was indeed a highly regarded virtue in ancient times, especially for Christian leaders (Titus 1:8; 1 Timothy 3:2).

As followers of Christ, we are to emulate his love and compassion when we show hospitality,

not only to fellow Christians,

but even more so to strangers and the less fortunate.

In fact, we honor God when we show kindness to the needy. For example, Proverbs 14:31:

*Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,  
but those who are kind to the needy honor him.*

As Jesus said,

*But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed. (Luke 14:13)*

Christ also taught us the second greatest commandment, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39),

and the Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that "neighbor" has nothing to do with geography, citizenship, or race.

Wherever and whenever people are in need,  
there we can be neighbors and,

like Christ,  
show mercy.

This is the essence of hospitality.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus discusses the hospitable behavior of those who will inherit the kingdom:

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”* (Matthew 25:34-36).

By serving others...  
by welcoming others...  
we serve and welcome Christ.

#### IV

One of the biblical commands for hospitality is found in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 15.

In verse 7 Paul simply says,

*“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*

Consider the provocative way Eugene Peterson translates it:

*So reach out and welcome one another to God’s glory.  
Jesus did it; now you do it!*

The context of this verse is the tension between Christians who were Jewish and Christians who were Gentiles.

In the early church, some Jewish Christians had a hard time accepting Gentiles into the fellowship of believers.

Paul says the whole point of the ministry of Christ is to open up the grace of God to all people regardless of their background.

Christ welcomes us all,  
so we should welcome one another the same way.

The welcome of Christ is, like God's love, unconditional.

It doesn't matter who you are,  
what you do,  
what you have done,  
how much or how little you have,  
or who your mama was.

You are welcomed by Christ.

The welcome of Christ is for relationship.

He already knows and loves you deeply;  
he wants you to know and love him in a deeply personal way.

And the welcome of Christ never ends.

The life he offers is eternal life,  
starting the moment you enter into a relationship with him,  
and lasting forever.

This is how we are to welcome the stranger and outsider into our fellowship.

Our welcome is unconditional—  
accepting people wherever they are in life  
and on the spiritual journey.

We want to welcome them deeply,  
not just in passing,

to develop relationships, friendships, with those who come through our doors looking for a spiritual home.

What we have to offer is more than membership in a nice civic club.

We're not just a positive social organization.

We are the church of Jesus Christ...

and in our fellowship a lost, broken, hurting soul can find peace and rest...  
and the greatest gift of all—  
eternal life through Jesus Christ.

After the way Christ has welcomed us,  
shouldn't we be the most welcoming people on earth?

## V

But today I want to take you a step further.

Excellent churches,  
fruitful congregations,  
practice **Radical Hospitality**.

The difference is in the adjective.

“Radical” means “from the root or source,” and radical hospitality is an attitude of welcoming that is ingrained in the culture of a congregation.

It is in the DNA of a fruitful congregations to go out of its way to welcome newcomers.

Hospitality doesn't just happen at the front door;  
it happens in every room of the church building,  
with every committee and every board,  
every Sunday school class and every choir,  
every gathering and every worship service.

The focus of fruitful congregations is on the outsiders,  
not the insiders.

They truly understand that the church is the only organization on the planet that exists for the sake of those who are not yet members.

Sadly, too many churches just don't get it,  
and they struggle to be fruitful.

But when they do get it,  
it's awesome!

Churches that practice Radical Hospitality do not look only at the numbers,  
rounding up people in a perfunctory way to get them to join the church.

It's not about getting warm bodies in the pews so they can take over the jobs we no longer feel like doing....  
or having more "giving units" so we can meet the church budget.

Instead, they genuinely engage people,  
listen to them,  
and help them feel...  
accepted,  
respected,  
connected,  
needed,  
involved  
and loved.

They focus on the ultimate goal:  
helping newcomers grow into disciples of Jesus Christ as members of his  
body, the Church.

Bishop Robert Schnase writes that “Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality.”

They do this, he says, out of a genuine love for Christ and for others.

Both pastor and members take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ.

Their members focus on those outside the congregation with as much passion as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already belong to the family of faith.

They give to this task their utmost creativity, energy, and effectiveness, exceeding all expectations.

To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values.

Good intentions are not enough.

Too many churches say they want young people...as long as they behave like old people.

They want more newcomers...as long as they act like old-timers.

They want more children...as long as they are as quiet as adults.

They want more ethnic families...as long as they act like the majority.

My friends, we can do better.

We can put our energy,  
                    our creativity,  
                            our resources,

and our time  
into creating the warm, loving, safe climate that allows God's people to be  
welcomed warmly and invited to share the journey of faith with us.

## VI

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.*

We have some wonderful people in this church.

But even more than that,

by opening the doors of hospitality in our church,  
we prepare to receive an even greater Guest.

The story is told of a couple having dinner at a stylish London restaurant.

The food was superb, and the setting—  
complete with chandeliers, crystal, and silver—  
was unbelievably elegant.

When the main course arrived, the woman felt the need for a little salt.

She called the waiter over, only to be told that she must be mistaken...  
each table always contained dispensers of salt and pepper.

However, such was not the case at this table.

Horrified, the waiter immediately brought the woman a salt shaker.

When it was time for dessert, the maitre d' appeared, insisting that because of the  
oversight the couple should choose something from the dessert menu "on the  
house."

The woman protested: “It’s not that important.”

“But Madame,” he replied in all seriousness, “what if you had been the queen?”

Friends, what if we prepared for every guest  
not like the Queen of England,  
but like the King of the universe?

Every guest in our house is Christ in our midst.

Every child bears the face of Jesus.

When we minister to the needs of any of God’s children,  
we remember what Jesus said:

*“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

**Hospitality to anyone is hospitality to Jesus.**

So let’s do our best to practice Radical Hospitality.

This is our calling...  
this is the command of Christ...  
this is our opportunity...  
to make a difference in the lives of God’s children...  
to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

***So reach out and welcome one another to God’s glory.  
Jesus did it; now you do it!***

Amen.

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