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**Sermon Series:  
“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:  
1. The Practice of Radical Hospitality”**

**A sermon by Mark E. Diehl**

**Baptism of the Lord (Year A)**

**January 12, 2014**

**Romans 15:1–7; Matthew 18:1–14**

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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 congregations. 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 entertain and 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. This week our focus is on the *practice of radical hospitality*.

Our scripture passages this morning speak of the act of welcoming and the deep significance that such an act has. The extension of welcome to another person is one of the primary understandings of hospitality. The Apostle Paul indicates that the manner in which Christians should welcome others is “as Christ has welcomed you.”

Paul did not write this because it is so easy to get along with others, especially if all are Christians. As a matter of fact Paul writes these instructions as a conclusion to contentious arguments over differing values and practices among the community of faith. Paul reminds them: Christ did not require us to do something, to become something different before we were welcomed into the family. The ministry of Jesus was not to the well but to the sick, to the sinful, to those who were not welcomed in most other situations. His ministry was full of grace and love, not condemnation and conditions. And Paul says, “Welcome each other as Christ has welcomed you.”

That is the *quality* of welcome to which the Christian community must aspire to reach.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew addresses to whom the Christian community is to focus its welcome. And all the assumptions are turned upside down.

When the disciples ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” the expectation is the powerful, the wealthy, persons of status and accomplishment. Are not those the ones who should be targeted for a warm welcome?

And Jesus takes a child, vulnerable and dependent, unaccomplished and unproductive, and says, “This is what kingdom residents will look like. You must become humble like this child. And whoever welcomes such a humble child in my name welcomes me.”

So the person to whom a welcome is extended by the Christian community must include the very least and the most humble. In doing so, we welcome Christ himself.

Those are the standards of hospitality for the church: welcoming in the same manner as Christ has accepted us and welcoming the lowliest.

Many New Testament scriptures are letters addressing the church when it failed to meet these standards. In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul admonished the church because at gatherings of the congregation, some people went hungry while others indulged themselves. In James, the writer condemned the practice of providing seats of honor to the rich while segregating the poor in less honorable places.

Leaders in the early church believed these standards of hospitality reflected on the Gospel proclamation of what Jesus did and what Jesus continues to do among his people and in the world.

And today hospitality still reflects on our Gospel proclamation and God's continuing work in the world. I think that is why Schnase lists "hospitality" as the first practice of fruitful congregations. 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 Apostle Paul speaks of his implementation of radical hospitality when he writes: "Even though I am free, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

Paul continues using an athletic metaphor of conditioning his body and running a race. As the Winter Olympics loom and all the stories are told about the participants' preparations, I hope you will translate that into the kind of work Paul was expressing in his attempt to reach others.

What makes hospitality "radical" is the extent to which the church goes in order to engage people of every condition with the Good News of Jesus Christ. The issue is never about our comfort; rather it is about the sensitivity and commitment we have towards those outside our congregation.

When thinking about hospitality and welcoming others, typically the idea of greeting comes to mind. A warm "hello," a handshake or a hug in a brief encounter that may include a question like, "how are you?" becomes the standard practice. Occasionally, people will come to church and complain that not one person other than an usher spoke to them during the entire service. We all shudder when hearing those comments.

Yet hospitality is more than a brief greeting. When I think about true hospitality, I imagine a host or hostess at a home who greets you at the door, who takes your coat, who engages you in conversation, who takes you to where people are gathering, who introduces you to those present, who makes sure you have what you need.

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

A while back, my wife and I were shopping. We were seeking a specific item in a hardware store and finally found an employee to help us. He was sitting at a desk working on a computer. He didn't look up from the screen. I interrupted him and asked about the item we wanted. He looked up and 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 the computer.

Mary and I looked at each other. The store was large and the direction he pointed was imprecise. I know his work was sales and not computer entry because that is the nature of that particular store. We didn't find this interaction helpful.

At another location of the same name-brand store, a woman came up to us and greeted us. She asked if she could help. When we told her what we wanted, she walked with us over to the area where it was located and then 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 stores were exactly the same: the quality and selection of the merchandise was identical. But I'll go back to that second store and I'll seek out that salesperson.

Now that doesn't sound like hospitality—it sounds like good business. Do you know how rare such good business practices are in the retail world today? Something in that second interaction made me feel attended to, important—not an imposition, but rather the very reason that person was there.

Our needs were addressed, we were helped, and in the process, an atmosphere of care and hospitality was created.

I know that is possible in the church, and it happens from time to time. It is important to remember that when people are new to a place or community, they know little about all the things old timers make assumptions about.

A person asks for directions. A veteran 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!

For instance, here at First Pres, we refer to Watts Hill Fellowship Hall. Everyone knows where Watts Hill Hall is! However, if a visitor was required to go from the sanctuary to Watts Hill Fellowship Hall, would they find any signs to get them there?

It can be helpful for members of the congregation to tour this facility and see how many assumptions we make about getting in and around, information that newcomers or the disabled or single parents would find helpful.

It is not rocket science. If people are in the dark, it is helpful to turn on a light. That is hospitality in its most basic form.

You may have noticed this trend in recent years. I have. More and more businesses place signs, written in Spanish, welcoming Latino customers. In addition to a welcome, the signs provide information about business hours and explain services available to them.

We have signs in Spanish on our property here at First Pres. The signs are out in the parking lot. They explain that their car will be towed if they don't have a parking permit.

A couple of months ago, the new DSS building down the street was about to open, and the director gave some of us a tour. We began at the front door. The entrance is glass and reaches up to the roofline. It is airy and spacious and full of light. It felt warm and welcoming. The director explained: "We want people to know that this place is for them and to feel welcome here. We want our citizens to thrive and be proud, and this place encourages that. There is a desk in this lobby area where people are greeted. We have staff assigned to help answer questions and accompany them to their destination if they need that assistance." On the exterior of the building are written these words: "Durham's Vitality is Built Upon the Health of Our Residents and the Capacity of Our Community to Foster and Enhance the Well-Being of Every Citizen."

DSS knows something about hospitality. The ideal to which they strive is not among the most agreeable of people or the easiest of situations.

Perhaps DSS could spread its philosophy and approach to leaders of the Durham Police Department.

Robert Schnase in his book tells the story of a small rural church of about 100 in attendance at worship. At that church, a visiting mom felt self-conscious whenever her baby started to fuss during worship.

Leaders in the congregation realized her discomfort and decided they valued having younger people so highly that they had to do something. To show support for the young mom, they bought a comfortable, well-padded rocking chair and placed it behind the last pew of the small sanctuary.

The solution that congregation found does not sound radical. What *is* radical is the attention they paid to the needs of one person or family 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 away from participation in worship, Sunday School and other educational programs, ministries and mission. What are the barriers or impediments in this church? Is it the tall front steps? Is it the closeness of a congregation with each other that makes it difficult for others to “break in” and feel included? Is it the lack of programming for parents with young children, or the isolation of an aging population? Is it economic or racial or employment differences? Is it a lack of challenge to serve others? I want to encourage you to ask these questions.

And to what extent does this congregation believe it is our responsibility for removing such barriers? Some barriers, like those I’ve spoken about, we have unknowingly contributed to. Other barriers are erected by those we might wish to invite.

Such barriers may be the social challenge to enter an unknown environment without any assurance they will be accepted. Some may be unfamiliar religious practices. Did you know that many who join the church these days have little to no former religious experience?

Are we responsible for mitigating these challenges so that others may become part of our fellowship of faith? We might say, “No, our visitors have some

responsibility.” Perhaps they do. Yet the Apostle Paul said he became all things to all people in order that by all possible ways he might win some....

I believe the issue of hospitality is one of the great opportunities within the grasp of this congregation. You do it frequently—I know, because I have experienced it myself in your midst.

The challenge is for such a practice to become intentionally consistent so that every person walking through our doors experiences it, too. I hope every church member and every leader here at First Presbyterian will engage the opportunity to practice such radical hospitality.

Primary resource and reference:

*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2007