

Radical Hospitality©

Hebrews 13:1-8; Luke 14:1, 7-14

October 7, 2012

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What do you think of when you think of hospitality? When I was in my 20's and even 30's I always thought of my grandmother – Nana – as being the perfect hostess, the model of hospitality. Nana and Papa, my stepfather's parents, owned Buckner's Furniture Store. And when my 3 younger siblings and I first went to their house, we thought they were rich!

When my mom married Craig Buckner I was 9 years old. My mother had had a rough go of it when she and my dad divorced. We made it okay, especially with the help of her parents, but our home and lives seemed fairly lowly compared to the Buckner's.

I'll never forget the first time we went to their home for dinner. And I remember the dinner perfectly! We had ham loaf with pineapple and Maraschino cherries on it and twice baked potatoes with lots of melted cheese and crescent rolls! And Meringue Clouds with ice cream and strawberries – my favorite! I don't remember the vegetables, but that's not important!

Nana subscribed to all the magazines that had to do with home decorating and she was able to change things and do new things every year, if she wanted to. She kept a scrap book of all the decorating ideas that she liked, both for the inside and the outside. It was a lovely home with beautiful gardens and a great, special place for us to get to spend the night. She had not one, but three, canisters full of homemade cookies, at all times, and always had green grapes in her fridge – a luxury to kids growing up in a farmhouse full of 8 people.

As a young adult, when I thought of entertaining and being hospitable, I modeled myself after Nana. I learned to cook some of her recipes and I learned about how meticulous she was about her house – even down to polishing every leaf on every plant! Welcoming guests to that kind of special place was real hospitality to me.

But look at what Jesus says about hospitality. Here he is at the home of a well-to-do Pharisee. He is a guest but he looks around and sees things they don't. What we don't read in this text is that right in the middle of this visit, Jesus heals a man with a disease the Bible calls "Dropsy" [swelling of tissues due to water retention/ also could be congestive heart failure]. And naturally, there are frowns and judgments at Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath. We aren't sure why this man is there in this fine home, but we know that the whole thing is inappropriate and that is why Jesus begins saying what he does about welcoming people. {He may not be poor/ he may be a member of the family!}

First, he says that we shouldn't put ourselves first. Don't come into the room assuming that you are high up on the guest list, he says, and go straight to the chair meant for the guest of honor. It's kind of that "first shall be last and last shall be first" kind of theology that Jesus has preached about before. It's the same kind of thinking as in the Beatitudes where he says "blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth." "Blessed are the hungry for they shall be full." You know, it's that "if you want to be great you have to be a servant of all" kind of caring and thinking mindset.

With Jesus, we move from a "Martha Stewart" kind of hospitality to a radical hospitality which is that "don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk" kind of thinking. Because we know, as Christians, that our charge is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, our Lord. And that we are to love God before anything else and love others just as God loves them.

When you think about how God loves people – ALL people – well, you know it's going to be radical if we love them that same way. Because we have a tendency to love those who are like us, to love to have them over for dinner, to spend time with those who are like us. We get in a rut with our friendships, with our comfort level.

In one of the churches I served, someone decided that we should start a soup kitchen. Now we didn't live in a huge city where there were lots of homeless people. But there were a good number of folks who were struggling, trying to make ends meet. Some had lost jobs, some were senior citizens who didn't have much to rely on.

So we started serving a meal once a week for anyone who wanted to come. And a handful of people did come at first. But that ministry finally expanded to be an ecumenical ministry with teams of people from all over the community who served up to 80 people one night a week.

What a joy it was to see the people come pouring in, fellowshiping together, so grateful for the meal, so thankful for a place to come where people made them feel at home. Because our parking lot was across the street, one of our members even made a sign that said "Dear (D-E-A-R) Crossing" and he and Fred sat outside every week, regardless of the weather, and helped people across the street, raising up that sign to stop the traffic, and took them down the stairs to the dining area.

It felt good to offer hospitality. But I have to say that, sadly, not every one felt that great about it. It was hard for people to not judge. To not look at them and say, "I don't think they need to come to this."

That's our human tendency, isn't it? To judge others, to decide for ourselves whether or not there is a real need – a necessity, a worthy reason for someone to be there.

What I saw was people with various needs. Maybe they didn't all need food, but the fellowship was far above the value of the food they received. The greeting and the

special treatment they were given when they arrived was something none of them got anywhere else.

It is beyond hospitality when we go further than we have to show a warm welcome – to treat people like they are special when maybe all their lives they have been looked down on.

That is what Jesus says in this next part of the text. He said, ““When you give a luncheon or a dinner, don’t invite your friends, or your brothers or your family, or your well-to-do neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” There truly is nothing more rewarding than to give to someone just for the pure joy of giving and helping them and not expecting anything in return.

I think it is so with the *In The Beginning Baby Pantry* mission our youth has so generously started. We’ve serve over 40 families in this first year and while some of us adults have suggested some limits, our youth want it to be for the pure joy of giving and to not judge and to give to the families what they say they need. They are truly showing radical hospitality!

This week, hopefully, you have been able to keep up with your daily reading of the devotion book titled “Cultivating Fruitfulness.” If you have, you probably see that hospitality Jesus showed to others was radical.

In Jesus’ day, the poor, the sick, the blind, the crippled, the women, the children, the widows, the non-Jews – all were lowly and in the margins of society. They were treated poorly and with no respect. They were considered to be obviously sinners – because of who they were. It was God’s punishment for whatever they had done, even if they were born that way. Jesus goes out of his way to welcome sinners; to welcome outcasts; to love and care for the little people; to show mercy and respect to all people; to lift them up and make them feel valued.

To offer radical hospitality is to step out of our comfort zone. It is to go beyond what we normally do to welcome others; to show our love and interest and care. It is to raise the bar, as Jesus did and taught and still teaches us. It is to put others first and to invite and welcome. It is to not just say on Sunday morning, “We’re glad you came. Hope you will come again.”

But it is to spend time getting to know about that person and to invite them to other events and maybe sitting with them and making them feel comfortable; introducing them to others; helping them make connections. Maybe it is offering them a ride to an event.

When Fred and I were first married and he was not pastoring a church at the time, we attended a Presbyterian church in a new town to which we had moved. We were assigned “shepherds” within the congregation. They watched for us on Sunday morning and asked if they could sit with us. They took us to fellowship times and introduced us to people. They invited us to other events and picked us up and took us. They had us over for dinner at their house. We quickly felt a part of that congregation because of the Newlands.

To us that was radical hospitality. Robert Schnase writes: “The practice of the Radical Hospitality of Christ must move beyond the pastor, the worship leaders, the ushers and greeters and into the awareness of all our members and guests. The power of Radical Hospitality must run deep and wide and shape all our behaviors and responses for the church to fulfill its mission.

“Radical Hospitality begins with a single heart, a movement from ‘they ought’ to ‘I will.’ Take responsibility for inviting one person per month to a ministry of your church and for welcoming people you do not know. Pray for God to help you with confidence and genuineness and voice.”¹ That was the challenge in one of our daily devotional readings, and a good one, don’t you think?”

With the radical hospitality of Jesus, we see more than a Southern Living, Martha Steward, Nana, kind of hospitality. We see a welcome that God extends out to all people, regardless of race or class, no matter where you come from or who you are.

I have to say, my Nana actually went far beyond that perfect model of being a good hostess. She took in a new daughter with four children and she made us her own family. She never once acted like we were not her own flesh and blood. She lavished us with gifts and love and grace. And when her own grandchildren who were her own flesh and blood came along, still – we were her special kids, the love of her life, her cherished family.

It was the same kind of radical hospitality that God has shown to all of us by giving his own Son so that we might be reconciled into God’s family forever and ever. It was grace and love and mercy poured out on undeserving, little people – all of us to give us a home and welcome that is truly radical because it treats us like we are royalty; special, rich, cared for children of God. And yes. We are. All of us.

How can we – individually and as a congregation – extend that same radical hospitality out to the community and to all who come inside these doors? You never know when it

¹ Robert Schnase, *Cultivating Fruitfulness: Five Weeks of Prayer and Practice For Congregations*, Abingdon Press, 2008, p. 22

will be true, what Paul says: ²*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Hebrews 13:8

Let us pray:

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