

5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Hospitality

Leviticus 19:33-34

Romans 12:9-21

This morning I'm beginning a 5-week sermon series titled "5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations." This title is actually the title of a book by United Methodist pastor and bishop Robert Schnase, and we first learned of this from Lynn Landers, who introduced these 5 practices of fruitful congregations to our visioning task force a few months ago, as part of our process of discernment. While I'm going to follow the 5 practices from the book, topic-wise, I'm going to develop my take on them for our specific context. Our Pacific Northwest context, and our Maplewood Presbyterian context, on the corner of 196th and 84th in Edmonds/Lynnwood. Robert Schnase's ministry has been in the south-central US, which is a different context from here.

This series begins this morning with the practice of hospitality. I'll pick up the series two weeks from today because Heidi and I will be in California this week and next Sunday visiting her sister in the Bay area. You'll be blessed with guest preacher Rev. Emily Mitchell next Sunday; a friend and colleague who I've known and been in a pastor group with for 4 years. Emily is the associate pastor at Calvin Presbyterian church in Shoreline and a terrific pastor and preacher.

Two short comments about this series, as we begin. First, although this series is titled 5 Practices of Fruitful *Congregations*, we could take out the word “congregations” and replace it with “persons,” or “households.” Because, practices like hospitality, faith development, risk-taking in mission, and generosity, are practices that we can apply to our day-to-day lives. In fact, the more each of us practices these in our Monday through Saturday lives, the more fruitful these practices become for the church.

Second, I’d like us to note that these are practices of *fruitful* congregations. Not “large” congregations, or even “growing” congregations—though growth would be a logical byproduct of these practices. The idea here is not that we’re going to get more people through the door and on the membership rolls. If that happens, halleluiah! The goal of these practices is to have persons and congregations blessing their community. When Jesus talks about fruitfulness, it always has to do with how his followers are showing love to the world around them. Showing up, and showing forth the grace of God for the good of others. Which leads to our first practice, and our next reading.

We heard our first reading from your favorite book of the Old Testament, Leviticus. Our second reading is from Romans chapter 12. I’ll be reading verses 9-13.

Romans 12:9-13

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This is the word of the Lord!

Our first practice of fruitful congregations is: hospitality. The author of the book calls it “Radical Hospitality.” Going above and beyond. Let me say, right from the start, that by “hospitality” I don’t mean let’s get out our Martha Stewart stuff and learn how to set up our homes all fancy for guests.

Biblically speaking, hospitality is not the art of having an elegant table setting and decorations, and a perfect home and all that. That kind of hospitality is great for those who love to do that and have energy toward it; it’s a special gift, and it’s wonderful. But it’s just one unique expression of hospitality.

True *Christian* hospitality is a matter of having an open heart (hospitality of heart) to welcome another—particularly “strangers and aliens” (to use the Biblical language).

Hospitality may not seem like a prominent Biblical topic, but I hope to convince you this morning that it is, from beginning to end. We just haven’t been

trained to look for it in our reading and study of the Bible, because it isn't a cultural norm for *us*.

It's not only a Biblical topic, it's an art and a practice that is deeply embedded in most cultures around the world—and has been for centuries. If you have had exposure to another culture such as a Latin American culture, or Middle Eastern culture, or African culture, whether your experience was from travelling there or finding it *here*, you have very likely experienced this extraordinary hospitality. You were treated as an honored guest of the village or community or household.

As we look at hospitality and what it might look like for us, here's a little fascinating history. The English word hospitality derives from the Latin *hospes*, and that word is formed from the root *hostis*, which originally meant "a stranger" and came to take on the meaning of enemy or "hostile stranger." In a political setting it even meant "enemy of the state" (someone who was "hostile" toward your people). But as the word evolved it took on a more generic meaning of "stranger"—someone you didn't know or who was a foreigner. A visitor or someone new to your town or village.

At one time in history the meaning of "host" could be literally read as "lord of strangers." Furthermore, the Latin word *hostire* means "equalize." Equalize.

Nice image, huh?

Derived from these Latin words are the English words hostel (h-o-s-t-e-l) and hotel. Also, obviously, hospital and hospice. And... hospitality.

In the New Testament Greek, the word hospitality is "philoxenia"—literally, "love for (or friendship toward) strangers." As opposed to "xenophobia" which means... *fear* of strangers.

The practice of hospitality originated in ancient nomadic life. Travel was rarely, if ever, for pleasure but out of necessity. And because they didn't have hotels and motels and all that back then, travelers were dependent upon the hospitality of others. Therefore, a traveler had the right to stop by any home at any time and expect hospitable treatment—a place to stay and find food and shelter—even if they were enemies! In a hospitality situation, even an enemy was to be treated like any other guest. When Jesus says, "love your enemies" his hearers surely would have understood that to mean providing hospitality, if necessary, if a Roman soldier prevailed upon them.

The Bible is full of this understanding, from the earliest days of Abraham, who was visited by these three mysterious guests and spread a feast for them,

which included his precious livestock. Jewish legend has it that Abraham was given a son in his old age because of his faith *and* because of his hospitality to strangers.

Jesus frequently experienced hospitality during his earthly ministry, from both friends and antagonists. He was seen often in the homes of all kinds of people. His ministry depended upon the hospitality of others. And btw, we know the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding, right? Why did Jesus turn water into wine at a wedding? Not to enable drunkenness, but to save the host from a hospitality nightmare! They had run out of wine. It was such an important part of their culture, and of the wedding feast, that Jesus literally saved the host and family from public shame. Today, it would be like a host running out of turkey early into the Thanksgiving dinner and Jesus turns the brussels sprouts into turkey (yay for that miracle!). So, we could say that at least one of Jesus' miracles was for the sake of hospitality.

The practice of hospitality in the early church was so important, that we even read in the New Testament letters of 1st and 2nd Timothy that among the qualifications listed for church leaders—elders, deacons, bishops—among the qualifications such as maturity in faith, being temperate, sensible, and so on, a leader must also be *hospitable*. It's so important, that it's listed as a leadership

quality. Because it was understood that hospitality of heart and home and church was a form of witness—witness to the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ.

I have a good book titled *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, which simply tells the story of the ancient church going forth, not to convince people of something or twist their arm for Jesus, or worse; but to serve and love and open their homes and churches to anyone and everyone in need, as a form of hospitality, which they saw as their best witness to the love of God. Their belief was, let people learn about Jesus Christ by what you do, through your open hearts, and your practice of welcome, *especially to the stranger*.

When Scripture tells us to practice hospitality we are told to extend that hospitality to *strangers*. Not just to friends and family, but to the stranger. We can go back to the law of the Old Testament, in places like Leviticus 19 (which Rene read for us), which is reiterated in Deuteronomy 10, where it says, “You shall provide for the stranger/alien among you, for you yourselves were once strangers/aliens in the land of Egypt.”

The great reminder from the apostle Paul in another passage (Galatians 3:28): “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one (equal) in Christ Jesus.” The playing field is leveled in Christ. Paul may be thinking here of that wonderful line

from Leviticus, that the alien/stranger is to be treated as a citizen—as equal—because they are among God’s people. No partiality.

In this call to welcome the stranger is a call to humility... to open our hearts to the stranger, whoever they are, that they may also know God’s heart of love, as we have experienced it ourselves.

So, hospitality really is a matter of heart, of attitude toward others. It *manifests* itself in welcoming people into our houses, apartments and churches, but it begins in here (heart). So, we take our hospitality with us wherever we go. We become a welcoming and healing presence for others in our day-to-day lives, and particularly as we are gathered as a community of faith, which is a community of welcome.

Think of this: Jesus’ hospitable heart toward outsiders is what drew some of the fiercest criticism from the religious people of his day. What did they say about him? He welcomes and eats with tax collectors and sinners. The real strangers of his day. Even enemies. It was a scandal. And to that Jesus said, “Thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.” Jesus modeled this for his followers, so that they would have his heart. So that his Church would create a community, where hearts are truly open and welcoming to everyone.

We no longer live in a truly nomadic culture (we're a *mobile* society, but not nomadic in the true sense), and, hospitality is not a cultural norm any more. We have hotels and motels and motor homes and air B&B's and all that. But God's people are called to practice it nonetheless, even as a *countercultural* practice. And all the more so in a time and in a culture that is fast-paced, mobile, and anxious. And lonely, for many people. US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy describes the epidemic of loneliness in our country, and its effect on peoples' health as being equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. It's that harmful.

Who has heard of "The Seattle chill"? I first heard that phrase years ago from friends who had moved here from the Midwest, and another pastor friend who moved here from California used it. They talked about how hard it was to break into community here, and to make friends—locals keeping newcomers at arm's length. The local tv show Evening had a segment on this a while back. They actually called it the Seattle *freeze*. They basically said, we're good people once you get to know us; but some thawing needs to happen before we warm up to you if you're new to the area. Maybe it's the rain, gray winters, or the wide open spaces that cause us to be individualistic and independent.

It may have started with a guy named Emmett Watson. He was a local columnist for Seattle newspapers and other publications. When Seattle started

booming in the late 80's and 90's he famously began dissing transplants to the area, and he made a bumper sticker that said, "Welcome to Seattle. Now go home." Talk about a Seattle freeze! That didn't help.

As we know, the region is booming; and there are so many needs out there. Therefore, this is a good time for Christ's churches to be thinking more about their welcoming and hospitality practices.

I am encouraged and intrigued by a hospitality movement among Christians and churches across the country, who are working to bring back, in contemporary form, old practices of intentional hospitality to strangers...

It's showing up in books like, *12 Marks of a New Monasticism*. #3 is: hospitality to the stranger. There is also a resurgence of the Celtic Way of Evangelism, as I mentioned, where hospitality *is* the way, and the strategy. Not more programs, or more gimmicks to try to get people into the door, but a focus on being a community of people whose hearts and lives are more and more open to others, where the wanderers and the wounded are welcomed, where people find healing, and hope, where people share their stories with each other (like, "where are you on your journey right now?") and an environment is created where *everyone* is on a path of growth and learning and healing. Where we *all*

learn from one another and grow together as God continues to shape and grow and, dare I say, change our congregational community.

So, instead of aiming to be a “friendly” church we should hope to be a church that practices hospitality. Because friendliness (or niceness) sometimes actually keeps people at arm’s length. *Hospitality* welcomes them in, sits with them, makes friends with them, and we learn and grow, together.

After college I moved to the Bay area and worked at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley in their University Ministries department. I learned a lot over two years there, including their amazing history. One piece of their story is about their building. Their building was vandalized in the 60’s during the protests and riots of that era, and the city declared their building unsafe. So, you know what they did? Instead of remodeling it, they torn down their sanctuary and rebuilt it, in a semi-circular kind of shape, and, with the exception of the chancel area, instead of building stronger walls around the sides and back, they put in floor-to-ceiling *clear glass windows*, with the main entrance to the sanctuary facing a courtyard, by the street. This was in the early 1970’s. That was a bold and risky move! It was their way of saying, we are going to be transparent, we are not going to be afraid, and anyone who wants to come in and join us is welcome.

One of the most moving experiences of my entire ministry career happened there on a Sunday morning... As happened from time to time, a homeless person would wander into the sanctuary during the service. There were people trained who knew what to do, and how to handle these situations. But one Sunday morning a homeless man somehow got past the ushers and began to wander down the center aisle during the service. And he wandered all the way down to the front, and then sat himself down on the floor. Meanwhile, a man from the congregation who was sitting toward the back got up and started walking down toward the front, toward the homeless man who had sat himself down. I found out later that this man was one of the long-time members of the church, a pillar of sorts in the community, a proper man who was somewhat of a traditionalist, and people were worried about what he was going to do when he got down to the front. At the very least people expected him to help this man up and get him to a seat, or ask him to leave. Instead, when he arrived at the front of the sanctuary, he put his hand on the homeless man's shoulder, and then sat down on the floor next to him. Without a word said between them. And they worshiped together from there for the remainder of the service.

I went to seminary and learned a lot there too, but nothing compares to witnessing what I saw that morning in a worship service. That was risky too! We

need to be safe. But it said something about the culture that had been created in that church.

John Calvin (you know this is getting serious when I start quoting Calvin):
“Hospitality is one of the pillars of morality upon which the universe stands.” He took this seriously because it’s a stewardship issue: everything belongs to God, and we are part of God’s good creation—all of us—therefore everything we have is give to us, to steward on God’s behalf. God has welcomed us to this earthly home, and in Christ, God has welcomed us into his heart and his spiritual home, and we have this home we call a church and it’s a home where all kinds of people are invited to come in and share in God’s abundance. We are stewards of our common life, and, like everything else we are stewards of, it’s meant to be shared. And not only that...

We’re told that when we invite a stranger into our heart, our home, or our church, we are inviting Jesus himself. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a parable in which he says, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me...” And he concludes that story by saying, “as much as you’ve done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it unto me.”

Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing so some have welcomed angels without knowing it.” I’ll just drop that right there, for us to ponder.

All Are Welcome