

We've been talking here over the past few weeks about a way that we are going to be defining our ministry, our community here, from this time on. We're summing up this focus with a little phrase that you'll be hearing frequently from us: Radical Hospitality.

Hospitality itself is simply a 'welcome'. ("Come on in!") *Radical Hospitality* is a welcome that goes beyond just doing our duty. Beyond putting in the 'minimum'. It is the hospitality of the parable that Jesus told called the Great Banquet. In that little story, servants were sent out to "*Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame*"- to invite all people to the Master's Table, to his Banquet. Well, they did that, and then they came back and said to the master, "*What you ordered has been done, but there is still room.*" To which the Master replied: '*Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.*'"

See, the first invitation was 'hospitality'. The second was '*radical hospitality*'... do whatever it takes – but let people know. Bring them to me – share my love. Radical Hospitality is about sacrifice, and compassion, and grace, about putting others' needs before our own comfort, it's about giving up some of our 'rights' in order to share God's compassion and love ... it's about demonstrating to a really messed up world another way to live. A different way. The way that God meant for us to live – a way of peace. And we're committed to sharing that hospitality – that love – with *our* world. The real world. The one right outside these walls. We fully recognize that this is a tough challenge.

We're aware that there's a lot of negativity about the church, about Christians, in people's minds today, the picture of Christians that a majority of people hold in our country – especially young people – is very negative. So overcoming that is going to require a lot of grace, and authenticity in our work (i.e., *we need to be really serious about doing what Jesus told us to do!*) Serious about being the people he called us to be.

You might have read in the local papers about the members of that cult in Kansas that came to one of the Cherry Hill High Schools last week. This is the same group that protests at the funerals of American Soldiers, all members of an extended family that basically goes around

spouting hatred, division, and very ugly sentiments. (I was kind of proud that some local students – including some from Moorestown – went to peacefully oppose this.) But you know, what really bothers me in all of this is that this is a group that is officially recognized (for tax purposes) as a ‘church’ even though it is not sanctioned by *any* denomination or legitimate religious group.

But according to research that the Barna Group and some others are turning up – there’s an entire generation of Americans who would lump all Christians into the same ‘pot’ – a lot of people who believe that this Kansas group is just a little more extreme, but its a difference of degree rather than kind between us...

We have our work cut out for us, friends. We’ve just been singing songs of this incredible Good news – that God has come among us. God has come to bring us hope, to bring us life... to bring us peace. And it has always been the mission of the Church, the Body of Christ, to be the bearers of the wonderful news of the Incarnation. We are the bearers of the Word of God, the Gospel (Good News) of Life in Christ Jesus.

I started ‘unpacking’ last week what we mean by “Radical Hospitality”, and we saw that any radical hospitality starts with God. The only reason that we have anything to offer the world is that we understand what God is offering to us. The Bible says that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for *us*.”

In last week’s message I used the Communion Table as a symbol of God’s Radical Hospitality – when we come to the Communion table we bring *nothing*, and that’s the way we all enter the Kingdom. We come to God with empty hands, and God responds to us with open arms. We need to be careful to remember that that *never* changes. We enter the Kingdom by God’s grace, and we *remain* children of God by that same grace.

We look around at this Table – God’s Table – and we see lots of people. People who know more than us about spiritual things, about the Bible, people who know less than us... we see people

who are poor, and some who are well off. We see people of many different ethnic origins, people of every political viewpoint, people who are struggling with – *everything*. Everything.

Our unity at this table does not come from us, it comes from God. We are mutual responders to that wonderful invitation. And at this table, God's Grace works in us, it changes us...

As we understand this Radical Hospitality from God, as we are at the table being changed by Jesus we take on his priorities, his characteristics. We then, in turn, *offer* the same hospitality to one another, and to the world.

But something that we've been putting into practice here – or, trying to – is getting our heads around the Biblical teaching that Christian love *starts* with the community of faith. In Galatians 6, as Paul is giving final instructions to this church, he says: *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”*

Jesus said something very similar in the Gospel of John: *“Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other.”*

Next week, I'm going to be talking about sharing that hospitality with the world beyond these walls – asking what does it mean to be the *body of Christ* in a hurting world? But I want us also to remember that the expression of God's love begins *here*. And *radical hospitality compels* us to look at each other with the eyes of Christ.

It means that we can't afford to be casual in our contacts with one another. We've been stepping up the ways that we serve each other – particularly through our Pastor's Discretionary Fund. We're trying to help people who are struggling because of the Recession. So, we're kind of categorizing people into two levels – low income, and *no* income, and we're doing what we can there- and I just praise God for so many of you who are making this possible.

But this is more than giving money away (although, that's pretty cool). It's looking around and seeing the people sitting near us... it's realizing that this person is a real person with their own struggles, and hurts; with fears, and needs. It's recognizing that this person sitting across from you may be carrying a weight that they can barely manage – because a marriage is falling apart, or because someone has died, and they feel abandoned. I have no doubt that there is someone sitting here this morning who came after a real inner struggle with their own faith, you don't know what you believe, and you aren't sure if you really belong here – and how we care for you (our welcome to you) is going to be the determining factor as to whether you continue past these first tentative steps of faith.

Radical Hospitality means that we're all on duty as 'greeters', whether or not we're stationed at the door, it means that we're all caregivers – whether or not we are wearing a Stephen Minister nametag... it means that we need to 'see' our fellow travelers here among us. And provide a welcome. Whatever it takes.

The last song the Choir just sang was called "Come Make A Place". And it's an invitation. The chorus goes like this:

*Come make a place the shape of Your love alone.  
Come make a place, come make my heart Your home.  
Jesus, I'm empty without You, and You're everything I need;  
Come with Your grace, come make a place in me.*

We're trying to understand here that when God makes a place in us... that we then have an instant and an eternal connection with all the others in whom God lives. And with respect for what God is doing in others, and compassion for their needs, we live as a people of Grace. Letting that love spill out to each other first, and the world, letting our lights shine...

We're going to close with our response to that invitation through worship in song and in giving. Let's join in singing these three songs of Advent/ Christmas – and while we do that, our ushers will come and receive our tithes and offerings.

Would you pray with me?