

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations
Radical Hospitality

Romans 15: 1 – 7

**We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

**May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

We are beginning a six-week preaching journey this evening/ morning, a series about the nature of the church. We spent three weeks previously talking about “Who We Are” as *individuals*, our search for identity. One of the observations we pointed out in that series was that we make important choices nearly every day that ultimately defines who we *are*, and they are *our* choices, no one can live our life, no one can make them for us. But at the same time, not only do we “find our true selves” through the paradox of surrender (to God), but we also saw that it is *impossible* to be the people we are meant to be in isolation. The “I” is important, but still, we need a community for our identity to be complete.

Now, for those of you who did not hear any of those messages, that may sound like a rather cryptic and confusing summary... sorry! But it took three weeks to put context to that, if you’re interested, you can check those messages out via our Web page. But the next logical step in finding our true identity, is to discern what a Community of Faith looks like... because it is within this community that, like a tree in a healthy forest, we will grow, develop, and bear fruit – as we were created to do. So, for the next six weeks, we’re going to look at what a Community of Faith ought to be doing.

** I’ll be using, as usual, a number of different resources in preparing these messages, including a lot of references to what goes on here at First UMC, but (also as I typically do) I have one *main* source of ‘inspiration’ for this series. In this case, it is a 2007 book by Robert Schnase, a United Methodist Bishop from the Missouri Conference. The title of this book (go figure) is *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.

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Now, I am actually reading this book as I write these messages. A few months ago, Pastor HeyYoung came to me with a copy of this book in her hand, and a smile on her face and said, “Take a look at the contents page!”

When I did, I went, “Wow!”

** Here’s why – about 5 years ago, for the first time we prepared what we called “Personal Spiritual Covenants”. Basically this was a statement (between the writer and God, no one else read them) of your intention to address four areas of Spiritual Growth in the coming year: worship, faith development, service, and giving. We’ve been addressing those four areas in one way or another since I’ve been Senior Pastor here.

After our program staff came back from an inspirational trip to a Leadership Conference at the Church of the Resurrection (Adam Hamilton’s church) last October, we felt led to focus our mission statement with a ‘vision statement’ - i.e., a statement of how we expect to fulfill our mission, kind of a lens to focus our mission statement. And we summed our thoughts on this up in two words:

** *Radical Hospitality*. I get a little chill every time I see one of these little magnetic signs on the back of cars here and there as I’m driving around in this area.

So, HeyYoung comes to me and says, “Check out the contents page of this book...” Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. And here’s what I saw:

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1. Radical Hospitality
2. Passionate Worship
3. Intentional Faith Development
4. Risk-taking Mission and Service
5. Extravagant Generosity

So, you can see why I said, “Wow.” Here’s this Bishop from the Midwest that I never heard of, writing a book that is basically about the path that First UMC has been following for a long time, but *specifically* following for at least 5 – 6 years. I have to tell you, that was rather encouraging to me. We are on the right track. (Maybe I’ll be a Bishop, too someday. HA!)

So we’re going to take a week and talk about each of these five practices, and on the sixth week, which will be the weekend before Thanksgiving, we will once again, as a congregation, write our

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personal covenants with God. These covenants will address our intention to be part of a fruitful congregation, by making these *corporate* practices part of our *individual* discipleship. And we're going to help you be as specific as you can in completing this *personal* (private) covenant that will look ahead to 2011.

**** (fruit)**

Let me share with you the opening words of the First Chapter of *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*:

“Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, their laity and pastors 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 their congregation with as much passion as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already belong to the family of faith, and they apply their utmost creativity, energy, and effectiveness to the task, exceeding all expectation.

The words *radical* and *hospitality* are not usually together in one phrase. To advance the church, perhaps they should be.

Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. Beyond intention, hospitality practices the gracious love of Christ, respects the dignity of others, and expresses *God's* invitation to others, not our own. Hospitality is a mark of Christian discipleship, a quality of Christian community, a concrete expression of commitment to grow in Christ-likeness by seeing ourselves as part of the community of faith, “not to be served but to serve”... By practicing hospitality, we become part of God's invitation to new life, showing people that God in Christ values them and loves them.”

That's a powerful introduction, and if we can internalize that, we can move on to the next item in our series! Because that's really – totally – my message for today. Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25: 35). Would we change the way we do some things to accommodate Jesus in this church? Well, of course we would... and the point then, is obvious.

[**] *woman in crowd*

The Bishop describes a scene that could be lived in any church, and in fact, has been lived here more frequently than you may imagine: picture a young single mom, standing awkwardly out in the Narthex, holding on to a toddler, seeing a crowd of people moving here and there between services. This is her first visit to this church, and she can't even remember which door she came in – which is

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good, because she's thinking of bolting. A friend from work casually mentioned how she loved the music at her church and invited her to visit, but now, she's not so sure that was a good idea.

She's wondering about child care – who does it, and where is it. She's a little self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one, she's wondering where the rest rooms are, too timid to ask directions, doubting whether this is the right worship service for her, because someone told her that all four services are different. She's wondering if this is even the right church. Where is she going to sit, what is it going to be like to sit alone with her child, and what if her little one makes too much noise? See, she feels the need for prayer; she feels the need for some connection to others in this world beyond the superficiality of everyday life... she feels the need for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband and her worries about her child.

Now, what if she has wandered into a church that actually practices what Jesus teaches? A congregation that takes Jesus' words seriously? They would look at this woman with her whole bundle of hopes and anxieties, desires, and discomforts, and they would think, "This is a person of great value... Jesus wants us to treat her as we would treat Jesus himself if he were here."

So with this in mind, what would be the quality of the welcome, the efforts to ease her awkwardness? What kind of enthusiasm would we expect to see – offers to help, to serve, to graciously receive her and support her and encourage her? You see, taking Jesus seriously changes congregational behavior.

And a welcome for this woman, or any of a hundred, a thousand other specific – similar – scenarios is not only something that we do 'in the moment', (i.e., as we see someone who seems out of sorts) it is something that we prepare for ahead of time as well. To welcome someone, to provide a door that is truly open to the world around us requires us to do some seemingly mundane things (but terribly important) like: tending the gardens, and making sure the property looks as beautiful and inviting as we can. It means clean rest rooms, first class child care with a special emphasis on *safety*... it means good signage, and all the physical things as well that represents us as a congregation that not only *expects* guests, but expects that many of our guests will not necessarily look, or sound, or dress like 'us' [me].

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Radical hospitality means that we are constantly aware that so much of what we do, we are doing for those who are not yet here – it means that we are willing to break out of a conversation with an old friend to welcome someone who is obviously alone and uncomfortable. It means we will *take* them to the coffee hour, or to Sunday School classes, or walk them to their car if they're lost...

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Now, I am not saying that we don't do this... in fact, we do. We are trying hard to do all these things. We have an incredible team working on our Property. The Building, the grounds, the gardens, the bathrooms, the parking, the nurseries, SS classes, youth rooms... they're not all where we want to be, but they are priorities for us. Our child-care is amazing... people *are* met, and guided, greeted, and truly welcomed by many of you.

I celebrate that, and I believe that God often looks at you and says, "Well done, good and faithful servants." But as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we have room to grow here. We can be much more intentional, and we can fling our doors open even wider.

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I received an email a couple of weeks ago that really blessed me. I asked if I could share it with you: (I'll skip the beginning part where she calls my last sermon 'awesome' lol...)

I wanted to share my experience with you because I think it holds a lesson for the members of the church.

I felt immediately welcome at church . . . the ladies in the nursery when I dropped the girls off the first time, a greeting from Anne Langshaw, a note in the mail from Carol Talbot. No complaints there.

But what really made a difference for me was when Nadine Mack introduced herself to me and invited me and the girls for dinner at her house. She knew I was divorced and wanted to encourage me to get involved with DC4K (which we never did, by the way). But Nadine went out of her way to be friendly to me. A short time later, she, Gretchen Young and I started a monthly book group. The time that I spend with Gretchen and Nadine is full of talk of our personal stories, faith, our families and even sometimes the book we were supposed to read. It is also a way to learn from one another what discipleship and Christ-like behavior should look like. These friendships are personally important to me, and they also encourage my continuing involvement in the church. Laura Harsche was involved in our book group for a while, so when First Place for Health started, I was more inclined to join that if I was walking into a group of people I barely knew. Nadine and I shared some of our teaching time with the kindergarteners during this year's VBS.

So what we need are more book groups . . . just kidding! I think the lesson to draw from my experience is we each have a responsibility to reach out to others in the congregation. We are conditioned to be welcoming to new people that we see around church, but to your point yesterday, what about the people we see every week? It's just as important if not more so to

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build relationships among our own family. Invite someone for tea, share a meal, meet up at the Coffee House. Chris Chichester and I met at Soup and Study and now we have an ongoing Scrabble game on Facebook. It may not come naturally to some, and maybe some people cannot do it at all, but wouldn't it be terrific if those who can, took the time to try to really connect with someone else? Maybe a challenge to issue is that we each reach out to one person on a one-on-one basis. Those interactions might not all result in friendships but some will. My friendship with Nadine and Gretchen has enriched my life and helped me along my faith journey.

That's radical hospitality in action. It started with seeing someone in the church, and going out of their way to help them feel welcome ... and then, of course, it turned out to be a classic 'win- win' as all benefited from the interaction.

Another aspect of Radical Hospitality involves some things that we'll talk about later in this series – as we talk about “risk taking service and mission.” The things that we do to minister the love of Christ to a hurting world, in our words and actions says to the world: God cares about you! God loves you. You have value!

If you remember, the point of our ‘Campaign’ to raise funds so we can continue to pay the mortgage on our new building was to show you how this building integrates into the total mission of this church. As we talked about Jesus’ statement – that what we do ‘for the least of these’ in the world is ministry to Christ himself. And we told some stories of how people in need (which is exactly what Jesus was referring to by that phrase) are finding their needs met through the ministries of FUMC. People who are suffering in poverty, hunger, homelessness, yes, but also people who are suffering through isolation, grief, hopelessness, sickness, being shut-in and lost. Your participation in our ministries – even something that seems so simply ‘businesslike’ as paying a mortgage, is really part of living Radical Hospitality in this world. It is making a difference.

Bishop Schnase makes this statement: *“At every turn, the disciples seem ready to draw boundaries and distinctions that keep people at a distance from Jesus. They have a thousand reasons to ignore, avoid, and sometimes thwart the approach of people, reminding Jesus that some of these people are too young, too sick, too sinful, too old, too Roman, too blind, or too Gentile to deserve his attention. Jesus teaches, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5). In every instance, Jesus radically challenges the disciple’s expectations by overstepping the*

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boundaries to invite people in. Hospitality has us seeing people as Jesus sees them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings before us.”

Radical hospitality means that we will find ways to go *beyond* the minimum of what might be expected. That’s the *radical* part of it all. You know the first listed meaning of the word? “Of or going to the root or origin; fundamental.¹” So a *radical* hospitality is one that goes to the *heart* of what hospitality really is. God’s hospitality, not ours!

When we built the new structure connecting our two existing buildings, we were required to meet certain ADA standards. We were *not* required to make our entire facility handicap accessible. We would have been ‘grandfathered in’ for existing structure. But you know, our congregation, led first by the Building Committee, the Special Needs Task Force, and now our Trustees and property committee decided that the *minimum* is not enough. (This is an example of why I said we have simply put a name to something we’ve been doing for quite some time here.)

We felt that it would be very important to make our *entire* facility wheelchair accessible. And so we began the long (and *expensive*) process of building ramps, rebalancing doors, installing ADA compliant restrooms, and parking spaces ... we applied for and (by a unanimous vote of our Administrative Council) became a certified congregation of the National Organization on Disabilities. This doesn’t mean that we’re finished in the process of making our facilities accessible, but it is a tremendous statement of our *intentionality*. [You go on their Website and you’ll see us listed.]

But there is always more to do! Our next major project will be making the Chancel and choir loft wheel chair, and walker accessible – because Radical Hospitality is extending *God’s* invitation to the world, not just ours, and not just what *we* think is enough.

Jesus said, come to me, *all* who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest... we have the basics of a good plan, that will be an improvement to the Sanctuary design in many ways, beside

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/radical>

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meeting our accessibility promise as an NOD certified congregation...we're just trying to figure out how to pay for it. Which is why week #5 is so important! These all work together.

It's that second mile effort that puts the *radical* into hospitality!

And I see examples of this all the time – I see Shirland Daglian (and, I'm sure, others) giving away what sometimes seems to be more stuff than we're selling at the Rummage Sales, to people who can't even afford the 25¢ or \$1 cost of some items. And still we end up with \$7 – 8 K in sales that goes toward ministry in and through this church.

I see radical hospitality in the efforts of our Trustees who clearly state that their intention is to keep this facility open to people outside our own insular group... it is an outward focus that helps us all remember why we're here.

I see it in action when someone comes up to me or Pastor HeyYoung and says, "Let me introduce _____ to you." And they do, and then walk out together. And only later do I find out that this isn't an old friend who came to worship with them, its someone that they just met that morning.

Radical Hospitality is evident when I go visit someone in the hospital, or stop by their home in the midst of a crisis... and I find out that I'm the third one there. Or I see a pile of cards on the coffee table, and I get to hear how much this Church has blessed that person.

Radical Hospitality is when we do a sermon series like last summer's forgiveness series (which I'm still getting emails about), and literally *hundreds* of people come up to the chancel carrying a piece of paper with a name on it that they feel the need to forgive... because you want not just to talk about following Christ, you want to *do it*. That's radical!

Radical Hospitality is taking advantage of opportunities of things like our "Grounds for Change" coffeehouse, or Wednesday night Soup and Study, or Family Fun Night, or VBS, or the "January At The Movies" sermon series [which we're going to do again this January, btw] to invite someone to come and see! Come and meet some friends... and the community discovers that we're fairly normal people after all.

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Fairly... except in one area. Where we're kind of radical.

[**]“Paul says, Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” In Galatians, he writes: ^{6:9} “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. “