

Sermon for July 2, 2017

Extend Hospitality

Matthew 10:40-42

The Reverend Roger Pancost

It goes without saying that we live in a state with an abundance of water. We are surrounded by four of the Great Lakes. Across both of our peninsulas there are countless streams, rivers and lakes. Beneath the ground there are vast reserves of spring water. And, as recent weeks have proven, we get an abundance of rain fall.

In the land where Jesus lived, and taught, water was in short supply, which meant that survival depended on people sharing this important resource with one another. Throughout that region of the world there have always been social conventions that make it clear that when a stranger comes to your house you are to not only offer food and shelter...but water! Despite these rules of hospitality, people have not always been generous in sharing this precious gift.

Jesus makes reference to the significance of sharing water when he says that if anyone offers even a cup of cold water to one of his disciples, that person is extending a welcome to Jesus and to God.

As a church we don't have people coming to our door asking for a cup of cold water, although the local mail carriers sometimes refresh themselves at our drinking fountain. What we do have is people coming to this church with other needs. In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul teaches that one of the responsibilities of the church is offering hospitality to strangers. Hospitality means welcoming the stranger and striving to meet that person's needs.

In a book titled, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase shares what he believes are some of the needs that people bring to church:

"People need to know that God loves them, that they are of supreme value, and that their life has significance. People need to know that they are not alone, that when they face life's difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace; and they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic reversal, and the temptations that hurt themselves and others. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than an absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through the most painful periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations. People need to learn

how to offer and accept forgiveness and how to serve and be served. As a school for love, the church becomes a congregation where people learn from one another how to love. People need to know that life is not having something to live on but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself but by giving of oneself. People need a sustaining sense of purpose.”

((Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, p. 18)

This list is not meant to suggest that the church knows what each person’s need is; rather it is a reminder that people come to church with a variety of needs. Those of us who have been around the church for a while have the responsibility, and the privilege, of welcoming each person with his or her needs.

Studies have found that the most important person to welcome a visitor is not the person standing in the pulpit, or the greeter at the door, it is each one of you. When an “unofficial” person takes the time to reach out to a visitor it gives a powerful message of welcome.

Over the years I have heard a number of people say that they are afraid to introduce themselves to someone because they are not sure if the individual is new to the church, or a long-time member. I always encourage people to approach anyone they don’t know and say, “Hi, I don’t believe we have met, my name is...” If you mistake someone for a newbie, and it turns out they have been active for 50 years, I can assure you that they will simply laugh. This congregation, as a whole, has a wonderful sense of humor. In either case, you are making a connection with a person who happens to be a stranger to you.

I think one of the most important things to remember in welcoming people into the church is that one size does not fit all. Each person has a unique personality, as well as an interesting life-story. Some individuals are willing and ready to start sharing details about themselves immediately, while others will choose to keep things close to the vest. It is important to respect their space.

One of the most uncomfortable things for many visitors to do is attend fellowship hour following the service of worship. If you happen to meet a visitor on any given Sunday, invite that person to join you at the fellowship time. When engaging in conversation, take time to listen and learn about the person. Chances are this individual has already done research about the church and therefore doesn’t need to be sold about all of our great attributes.

If visitors have children, help them navigate the opportunities that are available to them, including where the nursery is. If they haven't already met Jennifer Ringgold, our Director of Educational Ministries, take the family to meet her. Assure people with children that this congregation is not bothered by the sound of children in the sanctuary. I know for a fact that people would rather look at a baby than look at me.

If an individual continues to attend worship for a number of weeks, it is good to invite him or her to participate in other activities of the church. I am guilty of assuming that if someone comes to worship, and reads the bulletin announcements, he or she knows that they are welcome to attend all of our programs. What I forget is that people often need a personal invitation before they will come to any activity.

Robert Schnase reminds us that hospitality is more than being friendly to visitors. "Hospitality is a quality of spiritual initiative, the practice of an active and genuine love, a graciousness unaffected by self-interest, an opening of ourselves and our faith community to receive others. When the spirit of Christ's hospitality pervades a congregation, then every choir, youth ministry, adult Sunday school class, mission team, Bible study, and outreach ministry regularly asks itself, 'How are we doing at inviting others and supporting newcomers into our part of the church family? And how can we improve?'"

(Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, p.20)

I believe that in many ways this church lives up to the vision of hospitality shared by Reverend Schnase, and yet, as he points out, there is always room for improvement. There is always more that we can do to welcome a stranger. How might you offer a cup of cold water today?