

Sermon #223
Romans 15:1-13
October 1, 2017

Welcome to the Family!

He just seemed to like me from the very first. When I shook his hand, I knew immediately it was a warm, friendly gesture. He asked me pertinent questions and appeared to be quite interested. It was a brief encounter, but at the end he asked me where I was headed next and gave me exact directions on how to get there.

I'm referring to my very first encounter with Bob Wachtel, Rachel's father. It was a cool, October evening in 1981 when I first met him. During my junior year at Asbury College, I drove Rachel home to see her parents and two other students who were also going to visit relatives. I was going on to Minerva to see my grandparents. It was there at one of the exits near Wooster, Ohio, that I dropped Rachel off and met her parents for the first time. Rachel and I weren't dating yet, but we knew each other pretty well.

That was in October and I wouldn't see Rachel's parents again for some time, but Rachel confirms her Dad's first impression of me was quite positive. During the Christmas break, he kept asking questions about me. "I wonder how that Randy is doing down in Texas ringing bells for the Salvation Army." Rachel would simply say, "I don't know. Does it matter?" And then later he would ask about me again. Maybe Rachel and I are together today because of her Dad. He welcomed me to the family before she did. While Rachel was still a little cautious and hesitant, her father was saying to me, "Come on in son, welcome to the family! Without Rachel's hospitable Dad, I might still be an outsider today! Talk about prearranged marriages.

In 2007, Bishop Robert Schnase wrote a book on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. The five practices have to do with radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. These five practices are not mere fads or cure-all techniques, but are biblical and time tested. Thus, if we want to be effective Christians with a vibrant church, we need to pay attention to these practices. So, over the next five weeks we will be taking a closer look at each one.

Today, we begin with radical hospitality. One of the greatest passages on this subject, is found in Romans 15. In the previous chapters, Paul was writing about how to live in the new unity in Jesus by loving your neighbor as yourself. And the summary of all that he said comes right here in verse 7, when he wrote, "Therefore, welcome one another, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory." What might we learn about radical hospitality in this passage? And what is the purpose anyway, why should we show hospitality? We begin with the first part of the summary statement in verse 7.

- I. Radical hospitality is missional. "Therefore, welcome one another..."

A. To welcome others is to accept them.

The Greek word (*proslambanomai*) has a basic meaning of “to take” and the prefix “pros” means “to take alongside,” or “take possession.” Thus, to welcome someone is to take them in to yourself or your group or family, to receive them or to accept them as they are and make them feel at home. It’s a wonderful word and rich with meaning and often used in the NT in many different forms.

For example, in John 1:11 and 12 there is both the negative and positive use of this word. John says that the Word, Jesus, “came to his own, and his own people did not accept (or welcome) him. But to all who received (or welcomed) him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” This involves a choice. To welcome or accept Christ means that he in turn welcomes us into the family of God, to become his children.

Thus, welcoming others is much more than a simple handshake or a smile or warm hug. That’s just the beginning. It’s all about accepting others and taking them in to be with us – to feel welcomed and accepted. And the “one another” is reciprocal. It includes giving and taking. For the Jewish Christians, it meant receiving the Gentiles.

B. It includes the Gentiles.

As we know, it was hard for the Jews to accept the Gentiles, and vice versa. It was the huge social barrier of the day, just as it is between blacks and whites today. So, Paul goes on to show the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome that they are already one in Christ. In the rest of chapter 15, Paul quotes from the OT to show ways that the Gentile believers have also been accepted into Christ’s kingdom. In fact, that was God’s plan from the beginning. God blessed Abraham and made him into a great nation so that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3). That’s God’s radical hospitality, that’s true mission to all peoples of the world.

When we engage in radical hospitality we are in mission. That mission includes everyone – all those who may be hard to accept and hard to forgive. It also includes all outcasts, immigrants, foreigners, the poor, drug dealers and users, the marginalized, the sick, the disabled, the lonely, the elderly and the young – in short all – all who live in this neighborhood and those we partner with all around the world. That’s why it is world-wide communion Sunday. Welcoming others in this deep, purposeful way is one of our core values here at Belmont. It includes welcoming all people in such a way that they can come to know the transforming love and grace of Jesus Christ. We reach out and accept all into the family of God. And the only way to do that is to do it in the way of Christ Jesus himself.

- II. Radical hospitality is Christlike. “Therefore, welcome one another, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you...” (v. 7). He showed the way.

And how did Christ love and accept others? In this passage Paul already showed Christ example. In verse 3 he says that “Christ didn’t please himself.” He even endured the insults of the cross for us and he gave us instruction so that we can have hope (come back to later). Radical hospitality is Christlike because it serves and pleases others first and not ourselves. It builds others up and gives hope to them, just as Christ did for us.

And the only way to do that as Paul says in Phil 2:5 is to have the mind of Christ in us. “Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings... He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” That is true radical hospitality – one that gives up all for others.

There’s a painting of Jesus standing at the door of a banquet hall, inviting people to come in. He’s not only inviting, but he’s reaching out and grasping the arm of one who points to himself as if to say, “Who me? You want me?” And Jesus seems to say, “Yes, you. Dinner is ready. Come in and feast with me.” That’s radical hospitality. He invites all of us so that we can invite all others.

Rev. Gary Bullock, pastor of a growing church in Florida affirms that “radical hospitality is the very essence of the Christian community – the expression of the gospel. It permeates everything the church should be doing. What is so sad is to see how low the bar can be set in the church. Why would people bring their cast-off computer to the church and say, ‘Here, you can use it’? Why would people sit quietly and put up with a sound system that’s barely minimal? Why would people treat their church like that when it’s the church of Jesus Christ? And what message does that give to those who come for the first time? It doesn’t say “welcome,” does it? It says just the opposite.”

We welcome others like Christ welcomed us, when we stand at the door of the banquet hall and show radical hospitality. We do so by inviting people to church, sharing our faith, giving and receiving compliments, listening to others, doing the little things necessary, taking time out of a busy schedule to care for others, and watching what we post on Facebook, to name a few. But most of all it leads to a final purpose.

- III. Radical hospitality is glorifying God. “Therefore, welcome one another, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory” (v. 7).

Now at this point, we could hear the Roman Christians responding, “Say what!?! You mean if we welcome and accept each other like Christ did for us, then we are actually glorifying God? That would have been especially hard for the Jewish Christians to accept the Gentile Christians, because of the social hostility between both groups. The Jewish Christians might ask, “Paul, you want us to accept those unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles, and if we do, we will be glorifying God? Some probably thought Paul had gone mad at this point. But this is exactly the point that Paul is

making. He would respond to their question with a resounding, “Yes!” We can also hear Jesus’ words here when he said, “When you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” When we show genuine, radical hospitality to all, especially those we find it hard to love, then we are truly glorifying God!

The result of this is hope in the God of hope. That’s not wishful thinking, but rather a “confident expectation” of what God will do. The goal is to “overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (v. 13). Radical hospitality, welcoming and accepting all others glorifies God and leads to hope, hope for all (v. 4, 12, 13), because God is hope. When we glorify him by accepting others, we have hope and we give hope to others.

Bishop Schnaze writes, “People are searching for churches that make them feel welcomed and loved, needed and accepted.”

A teenage boy entered the sanctuary of the church that his parents and brother belonged to. They were there every time the doors of the church opened. But this young man could care less about church. He didn’t have the slightest idea why he was there. So, he found a seat in the back and pulled his cap over his head, anticipating taking a short nap. But soon he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked to up see an older woman standing over him, looking down at him. “Oh great,” he thought, “I must have taken her seat. She can have it, I’m going home.”

But she didn’t ask him to move. She placed a bag of butterscotch candy in his hand and said, “I’m so glad you are here this morning. I bought this for you because I heard that you really like butterscotch. I do, too! There aren’t many of us around!”

The young man didn’t open the bag of butterscotch for a long time. He later took it home and placed it on the wall of his bedroom right beside his heavy metal posters, his guitar, and his poems of emptiness and longing. It was a reminder of grace extended to him in radical hospitality.

Unfortunately, a few years later he stood in the narthex of another church, waiting for the service. He felt another tap on his shoulder. This time a man with a gruff voice called to him, “Young man.” The teenager turned to greet the man with his outstretched hand, but the man refused to shake it. Instead he said rudely, “Young man, you either need to take off your hat or leave the building.”

Conclusion

We all have the choice to be the butterscotch lady or the hat man. We can give or withdraw hospitality. My father-in-law was a very hospitable, caring man who made all people feel welcome. We are called to welcome all people in a Christ-like manner and so glorify God. That makes a difference in Jesus’ kingdom as we say to all: “Welcome to the family!”