

July 2, 2017

Holy Hospitality  
*Matthew 10:40-42*

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What thoughts come to mind when you think of hospitality?  
Martha Stewart like table settings? Or with stampede coming, perhaps bbq and western apparel?  
In today's culture hospitality involves entertaining and impressing..  
Today, let's put those thoughts aside, not because they are wrong,  
But because they do not help us to understand what Jesus was saying to his disciples about hospitality.  
And the practice of hospitality developed as a response to experience of God's hospitality  
The words we read today were not an isolated teaching, but the end of Jesus instructions to disciples  
As he sent them out to proclaim the good news.  
It directly follows the passage that Rev. Frank spoke about last week  
In which Jesus spoke frankly about challenges of discipleship,  
But Jesus ends with words of encouragement.  
He began with promise that those who offered welcome to disciples would receive reward,  
Which must have been comforting for those being sent to preach, .  
It meant that God would be with them, as they depended on the hospitality or welcome of others.  
But this passage is not really about how to earn God's reward, so enough said about that for now.  
Jesus extended the teaching, from those who welcome the prophet, to the welcome of the righteous,  
From righteous to welcome of the "little ones",  
Jesus emphasized the importance of caring for others as a practice for individuals and communities.  
With these words the disciples went out in mission to proclaim the kingdom of God,  
In so doing they experienced God in meaningful ways as they accepted and extended hospitality.  
Matthew wrote this gospel for a the early church about 30 years or so after Jesus death  
At that time the church was trying to survive amid persecution.  
It may have seemed foolish to be open to extend and depend on hospitality of "outsiders"  
But this practice was essential to the growth of the church and the growth of faith.  
Hospitality was not new to the church.....it was part of the culture.  
The Jews as desert people had a long history of offering hospitality to stranger, friend, enemy and ally.  
For the desert culture offering hospitality could be a matter of life or death  
In the desert, a cup of water, cold or not, often did mean life.  
The early church built on this practice developing a radical practice of hospitality,  
In which those welcoming others, welcomed God.  
It went far beyond the usual guest list for social events, to an everyday practice of welcome.  
It caused divisions because went against what they had thought was right  
Jews had been taught from birth that they were not to eat with uncircumcised,  
Foreigners and women and children were not allowed into the main sanctuary for worship,  
But led by Christ, in response to his teaching,  
The early church offered welcome and unprecedented care for all and included strangers as family!  
Not just of the acceptable and those like them, who believe like them, who act like them,  
but radical acceptance of strangers, outcasts, religious others  
They welcomed outsiders, those with different languages, those with many needs, those who did not  
have a cup of water to offer.  
Whereas Jesus only sent his followers to teach in Israel, to Jews....  
After Jesus death, in response to the Holy Spirit, they understood God's hospitality in new ways  
The divisions of clean/unclean, male/female, Jew/Greek, rich/poor, famous/infamous were erased,  
all worshiped together, accepted together, were considered part of the family,  
They did not just welcome them to worship services, but cared for them as members of the family.  
Jews and Greeks, males and females, slaves and free—at the time it was shocking,

The early church grew because of this practice of this type of hospitality, this radical welcome and inclusion

They were one body, of disciples, making disciples, practicing God's way together and richer for it!  
So how in God's name did we get to where we are today?

Although we like to think of ourselves as loving welcoming people, and a welcoming congregation,  
In general the Christian Church does not have a good reputation,

The Christian church is seen as cliquish, judgemental, full of people who are "nasty" not just to outsiders but to each other, hypocritical.

I would like argue and prove it untrue, but too often there is more truth to this than I want to admit.

As disciples we are challenged us to think more deeply about the practice of welcome

Do we intentionally practice hospitality in response to God's love poured out for us?

With a table set with symbolic foods and baptismal font we are reminded of God's welcome of us,

We are confronted with the truth that God accepts us, as we are,

That while we were deep in sin, Christ died for us,

With grace so great that before we are able to respond to God, God opens arms in welcome,

In imitation of Christ, in response to God, we are to practice the kind of welcome Christ offers us,

But many times we fall short.

Consider the following true life examples:

The first Sunday after moving to a new city, I went to a Presbyterian Church recommended by my previous minister.

I got my kids into the appropriate Sunday School classes,

Then found a seat on an empty pew, at the edge of the sanctuary.

With opening strains of Holy, Holy, Holy, a woman's hand grasped my shoulder,

turning me to face her, she said in a loud voice "Get out of my seat!"

It may not always be so obvious, but our practice of hospitality, can be limited by our sense of entitlement,

We don't make room for others, in a pew, in our circle, in our hearts, lest we lose something

We have lost the sense that as we welcome them, we welcome God.

Imagine welcoming God with Get out of my seat!

What if the first disciples refused to accept outsiders as God accepted them?

What if the early church didn't open themselves to change as God came to them as Gentiles, poor, lonely,

Imagine the impact if instead of protecting her seat, that woman had offered words of welcome and sat beside a lonely stranger, and then introduced her to others after the service....both I think would have been richer!

The practice of hospitality is not always comfortable, it may disturb and change us,

What might stand in our way of welcoming others as we think we would welcome God?

Another true story:

In a family size church in a poorer section of town,

The congregation welcomes people at the door, and invites new comers to coffee afterwards.

A new couple started coming to services and felt welcomed. They began to feel at home.

Neither felt comfortable singing, but one day, they brought their spoons to worship and played with the hymns.

On their way for coffee after the service, they were told that this was no way to behave in church,

It was unacceptable, they were asked either to leave their spoons at home or....

Sadly, they left immediately, we never saw them again.

Too often welcome can be limited by how much newcomers are like us, act like us, dress like us,

In other words, we welcome people who we judge to be acceptable,

Our censorship may be more subtle, we define our borders differently,

We may not be overt, but our welcome of those unlike us can be limited, we can make things difficult for them,  
Imagine if the early disciples judged people that way, or if the early church only accepted people who kept dietary laws, dressed like Jews, spoke the same language.....  
WE have been called to extend God's welcome to others.  
Imagine if God's love for us was limited by how much we were like God?  
What distorts and prevents us from a compassionate welcome and full inclusion?  
Our own sense of rightness? Our personal preferences? Our expectations?  
How might this scenario have turned out differently?  
What might stand in the way of accepting and including others as God accepts and includes us?  
Jesus assures his hearers that anyone who welcomes a disciple welcomes both Jesus and the Father who sent him  
By opening ourselves, our congregations, our hearts to others in God's name  
We open our hearts more fully to God.  
Whether we are old or young, long time disciples or seeker, rich or poor,  
As followers of Christ we are to practice hospitality, the practice of inclusion,  
There are many sitting in churches this morning, who are lonely, feel unwelcome, unrecognized  
If you aren't offering welcome who is?  
Another true story: Our family attended a new church that opened close to our home,  
The service was a little different from what we were used to, so at first we felt a little uncomfortable,  
But then a couple came and sat beside us, and offered a silent greeting.  
They invited us to coffee and introduced us to others, then asked us home to share a can of soup for lunch...all 5 of us.  
The next week they phoned to see if we were coming to church and were waiting when we arrived.  
During a family crisis, we were prayed for, cared for, reached out to, as if we were part of the family...  
Indeed, we were part of the family... we were welcomed, accepted and included.  
I wonder what God waits to do in and through us today?  
Imagine if we practiced this kind of welcome not just Sundays but every day  
What might happen if we practiced Hospitality and the opportunity to welcome God.