

## **“Radical Hospitality”**

Date: February 16, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: romans 15:7; Matthew 25:35, 40 Occasion: Inv. Evangelism, series

Themes: Inviting, Hospitality, Witnessing, Evangelism

So far, in our series on Invitational Evangelism, we have talked about sowing the seeds of faith, or simply telling others what God has done in our lives. Last week we talked about the power of simply inviting people to come and see. This week we want to think about how we receive any guests who may show up at our church.

One of the hardest things for people to do is to walk into a church where they've never worshiped before. "Which door do I go in? Where do I sit? Will I be sitting in someone's seat? Where are the bathrooms? Where should my children go? When do I stand and when do I sit down? Will people be staring at me? How long is this going to last? What if I don't like it, can I leave without being noticed?"

Honestly, if you haven't been to a different church in a while, it can be really uncomfortable. Which is why it is so important for churches to prepare for visitors – to have a plan to make them feel welcome and comfortable from the moment they get out of their cars.

Some churches have greeters that stand outside and notice when a newcomer arrives. They go to greet them and show them which door to enter. Other churches have greeters that stand at each of the entrances, offering a warm welcome, introducing themselves and asking the other person's name.

They might ask if this is their first time worshiping here, and if so they introduce them to one or two other people, answer their questions, and are quick to tell them where the restrooms are, even before they ask.

Regular members notice who is new and go out of their way to introduce themselves and to some other people. If they see someone sitting alone, they go over and sit with them. If they have children, they tell them what programs the church offers.

Lakewood has a Sunday school program at 9:45, a nursery for the little ones, and a busy bag of children's activities that parents can grab and use during the service.

After the service, people might come up to the visitors and ask if they'd like to go out to lunch with them. Or they might ask them if they'd like to join them downstairs for the soup lunch, or join them in the Sunday school class that meets down the hallway.

Radical hospitality isn't just a warm hello; it goes the extra mile. It considers what it's like to be a first time visitor. Having signs above the different rooms helps people to find their way. Informing people about different aspects of the worship service helps them to feel more comfortable. Because, truth is, they've never been to *your* service before.

Radical hospitality includes special parking signs in the parking lot, with reserved spots just for visitors. That doesn't mean if you're running late and most of the other spots are filled, that a regular member will take that spot, assuming 'we won't have visitors today.'

It's reserved for them because we consider them a special guest. We want them to have a place of honor. In churches that practice radical hospitality, the regular members park at a distance and walk to the front door, specifically to make sure there is room for that visitor, should he or she show up that Sunday.

But why? Why practice radical hospitality? What's the point of going to all of this extra effort? Well, let's look at scripture for our foundation.

In the book of Deuteronomy God reminds the people of Israel to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wanderer. Why? “For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” At one time, all of us were strangers to the faith. But by someone’s gracious welcome we have been grafted into the Body of Christ. Had we not felt welcomed and supported in some measure, we would not have stayed.

In the New Testament Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25:35) He goes on to say, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these are who members of my family, you did it to me.” (vs 40) Now think about that. The way we treat other people is the way we treat Jesus. If we really believed that, we would change our behaviors.

The hospitality that Jesus encourages goes beyond the cordial welcome we offer when someone appears at the threshold of the church, and then feel good that we’ve completed our obligations. Jesus tells a parable about himself, saying,

“Then the king said to his slaves... ‘Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’” (Matthew 22:8-9) Jesus wants us to go out of the church to look for people to invite into the Body of Christ, inviting them to the banquet of God’s gracious love.

Guess what! That requires an intentional focus on those outside of the church. It involves seeing ourselves as sent out by Christ and then going out of our way, even at the risk of feeling awkward or being inconvenienced, to invite someone into some aspect of the church’s life.

Paul implores the followers of Christ to practice an active hospitality. “Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:7) Another time he says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels

without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) The truth is, God uses newcomers to breathe new life into congregations. The church becomes healthier, stronger and more vital when new persons become a part of the Body of Christ. Amen? Amen.

Helpful signs, accessible parking, clearly marked visitor spaces in the parking lot, trained greeters and a system of visitor follow-up are all essential to providing hospitality. Accessibility for all persons sends the message that all are welcome regardless of abilities. Special electronics for the hearing impaired, a nursery for parents with small children, clean rest rooms and a well-kept building are all part of providing hospitality.

But none of that replaces the personal touch. People need to know that God loves them, that they are of supreme value, and that their life has significance. People need to know they are not alone when they face life’s difficulties, that they are surrounded by a community of grace.

People need to know that they do not need to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, and periods of despair, economic reversals and the temptations that can hurt themselves or others.

People are longing for a community of persons who know them and care for them. The Church is the Beloved Community. We know that we already care for one another, we the members of Lakewood. But does that sense of caring, and being a part of a larger family, translate to the stranger, to the visitor, to the seeker?

We need to continue to make the circle bigger, to intentionally reach out and include those who aren’t already a part of this Christian fellowship. We don’t need to be pushy or manipulative. We do need to be sincere and authentic. And if we are, we are then practicing radical hospitality. Amen?