

## **Radical Hospitality**

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Acts 9:19b-30

### **CHILDREN'S TIME**

Have you heard the word hospitality? Do you know what it means?

One of the things it means is "Welcome."

I have this floor mat just inside the front door of our house. When people come into our house they can wipe their shoes on it. It's also a way to let people know that we like having them in our home and they are welcome there.

Another way some people say welcome is to place a pineapple or a picture of a pineapple by their front door. That seems strange doesn't it?

Well, there's a story about the pineapple. In 1493, as Christopher Columbus was traveling around to discover new places, he and his men landed on the island now known as Guadeloupe.

There were no welcome mats, and it wouldn't have done any good if there was, because they didn't

speak the same language and wouldn't be able to read any signs with words. Instead, the explorers knew they were welcome in a place when they found a pineapple by the entrance to a house. It was their symbol for welcome or hospitality. This idea of a being welcomed with a pineapple spread and people began placing something in the shape of a pineapple at the entrance to their homes to show hospitality, like the picture.

Christopher Columbus brought the fruit back from his voyage and shared it with lots of people who had never seen one before. It was named the "pineapple" by the English because it looked like a pine cone and its juicy center reminded them of an apple.

The Bible says many times that God wants us to welcome people and offer them hospitality, to let them know they are welcome.

So, when friends come over to play, we need to share our toys. When we see a new kid coming to church, we can talk with them and show them where to find the activity bags by the door. We want everyone to feel welcome in our homes and in our church. That's one way we can show them that Jesus welcomes them into His family.

## SERMON

What does it mean to be hospitable? (invite comments)

What does it feel like when someone offers you hospitality? (invite comments)

Saul was in control. He had the backing and the support of the establishment. He had the training, the pedigree, the citizenship. He was endorsed and empowered by the Great Sanhedrin that met in the Temple in Jerusalem in the Hall of Hewn Stones.

The Sanhedrin was comprised of the High Priest, former High Priests, representatives of the 24 priestly castes, scribes, doctors of the law, and representatives of the most prominent families — essentially the top tier power brokers of the Jewish religious world.

Saul stood with this group behind him.

Saul was on his way to Damascus because he learned that there were some of those pesky Jesus followers hanging out there and perhaps even growing in number.

He was on that road because he and Ananias, the High Priest were of the same mind. This Jesus

movement needed to be squashed or else their power might be challenged and weakened.

As a zealous Pharisee, Saul went to Ananias requesting permission to travel to pursue these followers of Jesus to arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem for trial.

This was Saul's first missionary journey.

Although fairly young, he had grown a reputation all through Judea and Galilee, and likely beyond, as a man of power and a man on a mission to eradicate followers of The Way, as Jesus' followers were called.

So, Saul was on his way to Damascus, riding high with righteousness, power and authority. Nobody could touch him ... except God, and of course God did.

In a flash of light and a booming voice, Saul encountered Jesus on that road. He was left blinded to all he thought he knew and challenged to rework his whole understanding of Jewish law, Jewish history and theology, as well as his understanding of what God was doing right then in the world.

Saul had a conversion experience and emerged as Paul. Several days later, he regained his sight, was baptized a follower of Jesus, and received the Holy Spirit.

He could no longer persecute those he set out to “bring to justice.” Instead God called him to join them, even give his life for them.

This put Paul in a strange predicament. He could no longer go back to the Sanhedrin, the body who gave him his power. He had burned that bridge. He lost their support, their backing, their authority.

This is where we pick up the story in Acts.

### **READ ACTS 9:19b-30**

What did Jesus’ disciples do? They didn’t trust Paul. After all, they knew him and his reputation. He was the most prominent one seeking them out to persecute them. More specifically, they knew he was the one behind the murder of their friend Stephen. They wanted nothing to do with this guy!

Nobody wanted Paul. He was despised from both sides when he chose to follow Jesus. He was all alone — but not only alone, he was being threatened as a target of the

Sanhedrin, while continuing to be feared by the followers of Jesus.

What was he to do? Where would he find hospitable space? What community could he call his own? With what group of people could he be safe and simply be who God had called him to be?

I’m sure Paul was convinced that he was on the road that Jesus called him to be on, but I am also sure that he wondered if he would ever find a place where he would be accepted as family again?

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Paul felt it more.

Have you ever been ridiculed by others? Paul certainly had been, along with routine death threats.

Have you ever felt your strongest emotional supporters turn their backs on you and leave you? Paul felt this with great pain.

Have you ever felt a longing to belong, and those with whom you desired to belong didn’t trust you? This was Paul’s experience everywhere he turned.

In a very real way, Paul was stripped of his clout and power, and was truly at the mercy of those in whose company he found himself.

The turning point for Paul was when one disciple chose to create space for him.

It was Barnabas who risked by standing up for this guy that the followers of Jesus had known as their persecutor. Remember, this guy had been known as a hard-lined, fanatical, ultra-nationalistic, super-orthodox, Pharisaic Jew. He was probably their last choice to sit at the family dinner table.

But Barnabas chose the path of radical hospitality. He took Paul by the hand, brought him before the Apostles, confirmed the story of his conversion, and vouched for his character and authenticity.

He put it all on the line for this guy. This was risky! This cost him everything! If the Apostles didn't side with Barnabas to grant space for Paul, then he may have lost standing and be relegated to join Paul as an outcast even among the Apostles, pushed to the outside — truly on his own.

Barnabas was the first one to begin creating the space of radical and authentic hospitality for Paul. As a result, Acts says that Paul was able to come and go among them.

At first read, this might sound like they simply tolerated him being around, but this is far from the

truth. This was not merely setting up a desk for Paul to do his own work, while they left him alone. No, Paul was granted the space for relationship, a relationship status of friend and companion. He would have been included at the family dining table. He would have joined them in prayer time, in the remembrance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Paul was granted grace and forgiveness from his prior offenses and offered the space of peace, among a community where he now fully belonged.

Likely the most despised man in their known world, Paul was now among them as one of them. This is the power of radical and costly hospitality!

This is perhaps one of the most striking examples of radical and risky hospitality found in scripture!

I think that people in this congregation know how to welcome people without judgement. And that is saying something, because the Church has a reputation for judgement and excluding people.

But what if we as a congregation brought radical hospitality front and center. What if we intentionally took on creating this kind of space

not just here in this building, but in all the things that we do — whether we are in the park during concerts, or preparing meals before an art fair, or holding a discussion group in a local coffee shop.

What could creating the space of radical hospitality look like for this congregation? (invite comments)