

## **Family Matters...Being the Family of God 1: "Practicing Radical Hospitality"**

I have to tell you I'm as excited about this "Kick-off" as any in the past 14 years! I believe this is a new day at First UMC. This morning I want to begin a 6 part series that I believe might change the future of this already great church! It has little to do with me; and everything to do with God. We've been discussing Family Matters all this year; covering multiple subjects related to families, children, parents, marriages; and now, we'll spend 6 weeks discussing how the Family of **God** is supposed to operate. What is the church's business, and how are we to conduct that business?

It was 12 years ago that we began discussing a new "purpose statement" for First UMC. The result: *"We are a church of Jesus Christ that welcomes all people to: Encounter God, Love each other, Deepen our faith, Reach our Neighbors, and Serve God's World."* That statement has guided our decision making, and our ministry for the past 12 years. What I'll be offering you in the next 6 weeks, I believe, will guide us for the next 12 years...and maybe beyond!

I believe these 6 "Practices" are the reason the church exists. They will include elements of the 5 purposes we've used in our past, and I've added a new one we'll discuss next week, I've renamed them and added adjectives that I think are powerful. I've borrowed heavily in my thinking/praying about this series from a book by UM Bishop Robert Schnase, titled: Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. You might get a chance to read this next spring.

He and I intentionally will use the word "practices". Why? Well it works for lawyers and doctors, and seems appropriate for a group of Jesus followers who are in the long-haul process of 'becoming' disciples, or 'practicing' our discipleship. I'll say more in coming weeks about how these practices might be related to our immediate and long-term future. Let's begin with today's text for the practice of Radical Hospitality:

*And he said to his servants, 'the wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor. Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.' So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests. Mt. 22:8-10 (NLT)*

This passage comes in the middle of another of Jesus' unusual parables. The parable is obviously directed at the Israelites, those who were rejecting the invitation, those who were too busy and preoccupied to notice their Messiah before their eyes, those Israelites, who even insulted and killed the previous messengers. So Jesus changes his tactic and sends his disciples out into the highways and byways and compels them to compel others to come to the feast. We are the others who benefit by this compelling. We've been invited, now we are the disciples who must compel others to join the party. There are 5 strategies for becoming a Family of God that practices Radical Hospitality. Here is strategy #1:

**1. WE WILL BALANCE AN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE FOCUS.**

*Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show **hospitality** to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it. Heb.13:1-2 (NLT)*

I just love the mention in these 2 verses of "brothers and sisters" and "strangers". There was a day when churches could focus only on the "brothers and sisters"; those who were already in the fold. But no more. Back in that day, people were loyal to institutions and family patterns, and guilt played a larger role. But today, we live in a consumerist society, and we can lament that fact or embrace it and become something that people want to choose. I caution all of us that there must be balance here.

To focus only on the "brothers and sisters" already in the fold leads to inevitable death. I have a theory that every church is dying...except those that intentionally choose to live. If all our energies are devoted to only meeting the needs of those who are members, we'll eventually grow old and die. The larger the church, the slower the death march, but it will result in death none the less.

It is hard for some of us to remember that we were once visitors; that we were once the “new folks”, but it must be remembered.

To focus only on the “stranger” or visitor or new folk, is also to miss half the boat (at least). All people have needs, and healthy fruitful congregations try to strike a balance between addressing the needs of the already members, and yet to be members. Balance is the key! Jesus reminded us of this balance...

*I have other sheep too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd. Jn. 10:16 (NLT)*

## **2. WE WILL CREATE A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY.**

*Be sure to welcome our friend Phoebe in the way of the Master, with all the generous **hospitality** we Christians are famous for. I heartily endorse both her and her work. She's a key representative of the church at Cenchrea. Help her out in whatever she asks. She deserves anything you can do for her. She's helped many a person, including me. Rom. 16:1 (The Message)*

What are we famous for here at First UMC? Does our generous hospitality look all that Radical to a visitor here today? Well, that is going to be part of our new mission; to create not just an experience of hospitality, not just cookies, coffee and Kool-Aid after church, not just an event of hospitality, not just an emphasis on hospitality...we will create a culture of hospitality, that will altar our DNA to focus on serving one another, loving one another, caring for one another, those we know, and those who are our guests. That kind of culture will attract people to Jesus, and that is our goal! Right?

A few years ago I read a book, and preached a series of sermons from it called Good To Great. One of the principles talked about how each business in the world must find the one thing they can do better than all other businesses...then do that one thing. I struggled with, what can we do that is better than everyone else in the world; when all churches share the same mission: To make disciples? I'm still not entirely sure, but here is where I'd like to begin. I believe we can be the friendliest, most hospitable church in the world. It might cost us a little money, but not much; what it will really take is a “buy in” from each of us to become part of that culture.

No more sneaking out the back door before we have to shake a stranger's hand, no more spending all our time visiting with those we already know, no more ignoring the strangers in our presence EVERY SUNDAY! We will become famous for our Culture of Hospitality...and that will be Radical!

### **3. WE WILL DEFINE RADICAL AS – EXCEEDING THE EXPECTATION**

*And then, when we saw how Titus felt—his exuberance over your response—our joy doubled. It was wonderful to see how revived and refreshed he was by everything you did. If I went out on a limb in telling Titus how great I thought you were, you didn't cut off that limb. As it turned out, I hadn't exaggerated one bit. Titus saw for himself that everything I had said about you was true. He can't quit talking about it, going over again and again the story of your prompt obedience, and the dignity and sensitivity of your **hospitality**. He was quite overwhelmed by it all! And I couldn't be more pleased—I'm so confident and proud of you. 2 Cor. 7:13 (The Message)*

Radical can mean several things, off the wall, dangerous, out of the norm, crazy, irresponsible, impractical. But to me, in the context of Hospitality it means; exceeding the expectation. What do you expect when you come to church? You have a reasonable expectation that the building will be open, the lights on, the temperature... perfect! The music palatable, the sermon...well...tolerable, and I hope that most Sunday's we meet that expectation.

But with what expectations do our visitors arrive? Will I find a place to park; will I know where to go? Will I find someone I know? Will they welcome me? Will I stand out or fit in? Will I feel embarrassed? Will I know what to do, when, how? Will I be asked any uncomfortable questions? Who knows all the expectations people bring here each Sunday. All I'm saying is that everyone comes with some expectation, and it is my plan that from the moment they park, to the friendliness of the greeters, to the helpfulness of the ushers, to our spirit and culture of hospitality...each person who comes will feel like Titus: *He cant quit talking about it, going over again and again the story of OUR prompt obedience and the dignity and sensitivity of OUR hospitality.* I want our visitors to be overwhelmed; I want us to exceed the expectation!

Let us not discount the reality that people come to church because they have needs. 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, that when they face life's difficulties, they are surrounded by a community of grace. That is our commission, to exceed the expectation by becoming a community of grace.

#### **4. WE WILL RECOGNIZE THAT GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH**

*Dear friend, when you extend **hospitality** to Christian brothers and sisters, even when they are strangers, you make the faith visible. They've made a full report back to the church here, a message about your love. It's good work you're doing, helping these travelers on their way, **hospitality** worthy of God himself! 3 John 1:5 (The Message)*

I see this happening...our hospitality makes the faith visible. I have seen visitors impressed when a stranger invites them to the table of goodies, and offers them a complimentary mug along the way. It doesn't take a committee or badge wearing designee to make this happen, it takes willing individuals to step out of their comfort zone and enter into a new one. Hospitality that makes the faith visible is worthy of God!

I want to quote Bishop Schnase from his chapter titled: Radical Hospitality. "To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values. Good intentions are not enough. Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people. Many churches want more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers. Many churches want more children as long as they are as quiet as adults. Many churches say they want more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority in the congregation." We can do better! And we are! Good intentions imply that it's someone else's job. Good intentions imply that it's sure important, and someone sure ought to do something about it. Good intentions are only as good as the actions they prompt, and our good intentions will become Radical Hospitality as: #5

#### **5. WE WILL REMEMBER THAT IT BEGINS WITH ONE; AND IT BEGINS NOW**

*After she was baptized, along with everyone in her household, she said in a surge of **hospitality**, "If you're confident that I'm in this with you and believe in the Master truly, come home with me and be my guests." We hesitated, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. Acts 16:15 (The Message)*

I know that many, probably most of you are doing a good job being Christ's ambassadors right in these pews right now. I know that some of you are shy and don't feel that meeting visitors is your gift. I know that all of us can do better, be more attentive, watch out for people we don't yet know. Then, risk the embarrassment that they might be long-term members and step out in faith, and engage them in a conversation. I know that God has blessed us with visitors almost every Sunday. We are not going to embarrass them by having them stand and introduce themselves...we just ALL have to do a better job finding them, engaging them, welcoming them, thanking them for being our guests. Who knows where that might lead?

Actually I do. It will lead to some Radical Hospitality, which might lead people to want to know the Jesus that makes us tick. I pray that we might have a similar "surge" of hospitality right now.

I believe that this is the beginning of a new era at FUMC. I want you to know I won't take no for an answer either! If you feel that God has led you to be part of this fellowship...then get on the team. If you are confident that God is in this with us, then let's accept the challenge to become Radically Hospitable. It might be hard at first, but will be fun eventually. It might be messy at first, but it will be helpful eventually. It might involve risk and embarrassment at first, but it will be worth it when people are engaged and come to find Jesus...because of our hospitality...Radical isn't it?

Each of these messages in the next 6 weeks will include a plan of action. As much as I want us to be hospitable here in church, my first action plan is also for "out there". Here it is. On the top of your Study Guide. Turn to that now.

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### 5 strategies for becoming a Family of God that practices Radical Hospitality:

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### Study Guide:

**Action Plan:** Write the names of 3 people you know who need Jesus and His church. Begin praying specifically and intentionally for them. When God opens the door – love them, invite them, welcome them, bring them with you! Ask them to drive!

1. Discuss the word “Practice” as it relates to these new priorities we’ll be considering for the church. Is that a good word. What images does it denote, or thinking does it prompt with you?
2. Of the 5 Strategies, which do you think our church is currently doing the best? Give examples of your answer
3. Of the 5 Strategies, of which do you think our church is currently weakest? Give examples.
4. Which of the strategies most excites you, and makes you think it will have the most profound affect on our church?
5. Which of the strategies most intimidates or scares you as far as your personal application of its principles?
6. Following is an Old Testament example of hospitality. Make a list of the things Abraham did that demonstrated hospitality. Which of them might we emulate?

*One day Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up and noticed three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran to meet them and welcomed them, bowing low to the ground. “My Lord,” he said, “if it pleases you, stop here for awhile. Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. And since you’ve honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue on your journey.” Gen. 18:1-5 (NLT)*

7. Discuss the implementation of your action plan.