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Radical Hospitality Romans 15:7, Hebrews 13:1-2

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In the coming weeks I will be preaching a series on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. The idea for the series came from the book of the same title that is available at the Welcome Center if you would like to read it. The book was recommended to me by colleagues in the Christian Leadership program I have been in at Duke University this year. **The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations are Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity.** These are practices that we engage in individually as well as collectively as a church. Each week I will preach about one practice and then in Bible Study on Wednesday evening and Thursday morning, we will look at Biblical examples of each practice and discuss how we can live them out in our personal lives and as a congregation.

“Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ.” I sometimes tease my parents a little bit in my sermons because my dad used me as a source of sermon illustrations for years, but one thing my parent’s have practiced throughout their lives is hospitality. Throughout my life growing up we had people staying in our home: refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia, students from Mexico, the United Kingdom, and some Scandinavian country I don’t remember anymore. Not only did we have international people, but we were always having folks over from church – Deacon’s, Trustees, all kinds of folks. As a boy I had to help by cleaning up and by asking people what they wanted to drink and bringing it to them. Hospitality doesn’t mean you have a big house or a home suitable for Good Housekeeping. It has more to do with your heart than your home.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality. Out of genuine love for Jesus and for others, we take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ.¹ Radical Hospitality means loving people who are not yet part of the faith community, it means having an outward focus, it is a willingness to be open, adaptable, and to change in order to meet the needs of newcomers and to receive their talents. For example, providing the opportunity for folk to share their music talents on Monday,

¹ Robert Schnase, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, p. 11.

September 21 at 7:00 pm is one way of being open to new people. According to the New Testament, welcoming new people is vitally important.

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Romans 15:7

“Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Hebrews 13:1-2

The practice of Hospitality is seen throughout the Bible from the Book of Genesis right through the New Testament. In Genesis Abraham and Sarah welcome visitors and provide them gracious hospitality and their lives and literally the course of human history was altered. In Deuteronomy 10:19, God reminds the people of Israel to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wanderer because *“You were strangers in the land of Egypt.”*

Those of us who have been followers of Jesus for most of our lives can forget that at one point, we also were strangers to the faith, or we may not think much about what life was like before we were part of this community of faith in which we find meaning, grace, hope, friendship, and service. Every single one of us belongs to the Body of Christ because of someone else’s hospitality. Someone invited us, encouraged us, received us, and helped us feel welcome so that we wanted to return and wanted to stay. A family member, a friend, a co-worker, a pastor, a Sunday School Teacher – someone else’s initiative, love, and support motivated us to say, *“I want to be part of what people are experiencing here.”*

Jesus says (Matthew 25:35), *“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”* *“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”* (Matthew 25:40). Believing this with all our heart changes our behavior toward all people, including and especially folks we don’t know. Each person we encounter in the world and the church – if we believed each person was Jesus that would impact how we treat them. Sometimes a person comes to BBC and feels he or she is ignored, not spoken to, or not treated as he or she hoped. Sometimes people come and believe we are a very friendly church. Every week, based on what we do from the time we leave our home until we return, we are helping to shape people’s experience of the church.

In the New Testament there is a great emphasis on Hospitality in the early church, and then as now, the responsibilities and risks of providing hospitality were taken up more by women than men. More often than men, women are mentioned in the New Testament as leaders and hosts of early house churches. The obligations and challenges facing these women would make most modern day Christians a little

nervous. There was in the first place the responsibility for physical arrangements. The house, however small, must be readied to receive inquirers and believers. Arrangements must be made in a suitable room, including moving other family activities to different parts of the house. The frequency of the communal love feasts necessitated both preparation and clean-up. Even though members of the congregation were responsible for bringing their own food, the burden on the host was not a small one. There was as well the necessity of housing the traveling missionary and prophet, and of providing out of one's food for them during their stay. Although the early Christian practice forbade lengthy visits (not more than three days at most-something some folks on the Cape might want to consider☺), such hospitality might well put a strain on those of more modest means.

Perhaps more trying than the physical and financial arrangements were those involving the disposition of the family. The expectations for healthy Christian family relationships were particularly incumbent upon those in whose homes Christians gathered for worship. In essence, the congregation became the wider family; and there was little of private life that could have been concealed from the wider group. If people were fighting or relationships were strained, it was hard to hide that. We have it easy, we can get dressed up, put on a smile, and be nice at church, and put up a good front. But when the church is coming to and meeting in your home, it is hard to hide. That is why the New Testament says having one's own family in good order was a basic necessity for leadership.

Unquestionably opening one's home as a place of Christian meeting laid one open to persecution. This is still true in many countries in the world today. Before his conversion, we read that the Apostle Paul broke into private houses and dragged out those inside. In the Book of Acts (Read Acts 12:5-17 for the details), in the midst of severe persecution, a trusted slave woman, Rhoda was stationed as door keeper at the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. Rhoda, recognized Peter's voice and ran to the others for permission to allow him to enter. Although the people at the prayer meeting initially challenged the credibility of her story, she remained steadfast in the midst of their opposition. It is funny how Christians can gather to pray and then when their prayer is answered – they don't believe it! At Rhoda's insistence the door is opened, Peter is welcomed and the slave woman vindicated. Her critically responsible position as guardian of the gate during a time of intense persecution illustrates her importance to the Christian community and its confidence in her. Through this house church, whose

leaders are Mary and Rhoda, Peter sends his message to the believers of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). Although Peter is admitted to the house after his escape from prison he leaves speedily so as not to heighten the danger for the others. To receive a leader into one's home might well be to court persecution. Later we read of the abusive treatment given to one of Paul's hosts.

From the biblical texts, we know the names of female leaders more often than we know the names of male leaders of house churches. Women who exercised the grace of hospitality received into their homes both traveling missionaries and those seeking a place of Christian worship and fellowship.

The home of Lydia, the first European convert, becomes the center of the new Christian community in Philippi; and it is here that Paul and Silas stay after their release from prison. Ben Witherington observes, "At the two points in Acts where Luke clearly tells us of a church meeting in a particular person's home, it is in the home of a woman."² We read also of house churches in the homes of Chloe, Nympha, and Priscilla and Aquila. (Col. 4:15; I Cor. 1:11; 16:19; Romans 16:3-5). Women with enough space in their homes thus provided a needed function both in their hospitality and in caring for the congregational life that developed in their homes.

Like in the New Testament, our homes and our church can be places of hospitality and acceptance where people experience the love of God and the reality of Jesus. People are searching for churches that make them feel welcome and loved, needed and accepted. Each of us has to decide if we are going to take responsibility for practicing Radical Hospitality out of love for Jesus and God's people. We are called to be inviting people. Every member, ministry, team, group, class – can take steps to be more hospitable and intentionally inviting. Each ministry and group can be asking what they can do to reach those who are not yet present. From Building and Grounds to Assimilation, Deacons, Missions, Community Life and Fellowship, Adult Discipleship, Children and Student ministries, and Worship and every team under each one can be thinking about what they can do to help us reach those who are not yet here.

It might surprise some of you to know there are far more people who consider BBC their church than are here on any Sunday morning or who are members of the church. One of the times people in the community reach out to us is when they have experienced a death in the family. When a family is experiencing grief, the church has

²[1]Ben Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 p. 213

the opportunity to provide hospitality, comfort and caring in some of life's most difficult days. Through our volunteers who compose our Deacons, AV Team, and Caring Heart to Heart Ministry as well as our staff – we are able to be instruments of God's love.

Last month I received a letter from someone who is not a member of BBC who attended one of the memorial services we held not too long ago that was followed by a reception. He wrote me a letter about his experience at BBC that speaks to the importance of thinking of other people and making them feel welcome. The letter said in part, "Greetings Pastor Scalise, I wanted to tell you how impressed I was with the Brewster Baptist Church and the service. I love events, programs, and presentations that start on time. My philosophy is that it shows a certain respect for those people who make the effort to be present and ready. Very quietly, a few minutes before 11:30 you walked up the steps in the front of the church and precisely at 11:30 you stepped forward and began to speak. Punctuality. Yeah!

"I thought as the service unfolded, it was just right in terms of tempo, time, and content. Excellent economy of words, while still covering the salient points. The audio visual aids you have in the church are immense. What a nice feeling to look up on the screen and see the words to the hymns and prayers. Psychologically and physically, I find this to be so uplifting. Little things mean a lot. But the fact you are looking up (not down), has positive ramifications and qualities for the spirit. Plus symbolically, I think it means a lot and enhances the pastoral feeling and message. Congratulations for creating an environment conducive to making one feel comfortable and welcome at the Brewster Baptist Church. Appreciatively, David."

This is the kind of feeling we want to evoke in people when they come here. This is an example of a time when we accomplished what is written in Romans 15 and Hebrews 13. We can celebrate what we are doing well and we can always do better. When you get right down to it, a congregation is a school for love, where we learn by God's Spirit how to give love to and receive love from friends, neighbors, and newcomers. People need to know that God loves them, that they are of supreme value, and that their life has significance. The church exists is to draw people into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that changes their lives. We believe in the life Jesus lived – the lessons he taught, the people he touched, the healing he offered, the forgiveness he gave, the love he showed, the sacrifice he made – is the life that really is life.

Radical Hospitality shapes the work of every volunteer and staff member. We all pray, plan, and work that our ministry and service are done with excellence and with

special attention to inviting others and helping them feel welcome. I need some people who are willing to help out with getting the coffee and refreshments out for fellowship time so we can practice hospitality with those who come to BBC on Sunday morning. You don't need to know the Bible or have a seminary degree, you don't have to have any theological training, and we will train you in what you do need to know and show you where the cookies are. If you feel God prodding your heart about being more hospitable and with helping other people feel welcome, would you please speak to me or Joyce Davis after worship? I will be personally very grateful.

May God inspire us all to take up the challenge to practice Radical Hospitality.

Note: If you would like to learn more about the practice of Christian Hospitality, please join the Adult class taught by Bob Smith at 9:45 in the Fellowship Hall. The class is all about the practice of Christian Hospitality.