

# Open Wide the Doors!

Matthew 25:35, 40

1) Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness is the foundation for our understanding of the 40 days of the Lenten season.

- For Jesus, this was a time of personal preparation for the work which God sent him to accomplish on earth.
- For Christians, Lent is a 40-day period of self-examination in preparation for the observance of holy week, the last supper, the rejection, suffering, and crucifixion of Jesus.

a. This year, our Lenten journey of self-examination is being guided by the book, *"Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations."* This book was written by Bishop Robert Schnase of the Missouri area of the United Methodist Church. I'll be preaching about these five practices during Lent, and our Lenten home groups will be reading, discussing, and praying about them. Copies of Bishop Schnase's book may be purchased in Trinity Hall.

b. The first of the "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations" is this: Radical Hospitality. The word hospitality comes from a Latin term meaning to care for a guest – to welcome a stranger. Our word hospital comes from this same Latin root. Hospitality is welcoming a stranger and offering assistance as needed.

c. Hospitality is a theme that streams through Scripture.

2) In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews, the author reminds us –

***"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."*** (Hebrews 13:2)

a. Many scholars believe that the writer had the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis in mind. You may recall that in that chapter three strangers show up one day at the tent of Abraham and Sarah. Even though Abraham and Sarah don't know the strangers, the two of them immediately set about changing their routines and giving away their goods to accommodate them:

- they bring water to wash the strangers' feet,
- they make fresh bread for them,
- they slaughter one of their best calves to give them some food.

Abraham and Sarah allow these three strangers to interrupt their day and change their routine, only to discover that the three are in fact messengers from God, who have come to announce to them a great gift.

- Can you imagine what an amazing display of hospitality it would be to make strangers in a church feel as special and loved and important as Abraham and Sarah helped those three visitors feel?

b. Let's face it, we live in an un-hospitable world. People today simply do not go out of their way one for another. There are churches like that – They

- want more young people, just as long as they act like old people.
- want newcomers, as long as they act like old-timers.
- want more children, as long as they are as quiet as adults.
- want more ethnic families, as long as they act like the majority.

We can do better than that. There can be a place where people know they are welcomed, loved, respected, wanted and needed – and that place can be Mt. Auburn United Methodist Church.

3) God reminds the people of Israel in the Old Testament to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wanderer. Why?

***"For you were strangers in the land of Egypt."***

(Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19)

We too were once strangers to the faith, residing outside the kingdom of God. We too were in the darkness, lost and lonely without the hope of Christ. We now belong to the Body of Christ because of someone else's hospitality. Someone invited us, received us, and helped us feel welcome. By someone's love, we were engrafted onto the Body of Christ. If we had not felt welcomed and supported in some way, we would not have stayed.

4) The Apostle Paul said,

***"Welcome one another, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God."*** (Romans 15:7)

a. Jesus welcomed all kinds of people all the time.

- He welcomed the little children, after his disciples tried to send them and their mothers away. Jesus doesn't have time for you, they thought. But Jesus said unto these is the kingdom of Heaven!

- Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He ate with former prostitutes and with notorious sinners, and the religious leaders objected -- If He only knew who these people were, they thought.

b. Jesus knew! He said that the sick need a doctor, not the well. He came to seek and to save sinners, not those who thought themselves righteous! He included those thought unclean – outcasts, gentiles, and women. Jesus made a point of widening the circle of grace and opening up people’s understanding of God’s inclusive love.

5) In the parable of the Great Judgment, Jesus says,  
***"I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . What ever you did for the least of these brothers of mine you did for me."*** (Matthew 25:35b; 40b)

We can offer ourselves to Christ by offering Christ to others in everything we do.

6) The words radical and hospitality are not usually linked together in one sentence. But in the Christian Church, these two words should walk hand in hand. When God’s hospitality shows up in the most inhospitable environments – that is Radical Hospitality. Radical hospitality goes to the extremes, and we do it joyfully, not superficially, because we know our invitation is the invitation of Christ!

- We practice radical hospitality because people are messed up and lost. And the only way to get straight and become un-lost is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- We practice radical hospitality because we care. There is a right way and a wrong way. There is life and there is death. There is heaven and there is hell.

7) John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced hospitality in ways so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found it offensive. Wesley preached to thousands on roadsides and in open fields in order to reach coal miners, field laborers, factory workers, the underclass, and the poorest of the poor – people that the upper crust of society had given up for lost.

He invited them into God’s Kingdom and nurtured in them a strong sense of belonging as he organized societies and classes for mutual accountability, support and care. Those early Methodist’s lives were so radically changed that it actually staved off a violent revolution in England.

Mt. Auburn United Methodist Church is the presence of Christ in this community – the means by which God brings us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us. Practicing hospitality is what we are to be about! We invite people into this mysterious life-changing community that finds its purpose in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

8) Being welcoming really begins in the heart. It begins in being open to others, seeing them. Noticing another person and seeing things from their perspective. What must they be feeling? How can I make them feel welcome? Do we invite them in? Do we reach out to them and let them know that they are welcome?

a. To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values. Good intentions aren't enough. We need to adopt an invitational way of doing things that changes everything we do.

- We can pray that God helps us to anticipate the needs of the visitors we see at church that day, knowing that we might very well be serving undercover angels right here in our midst.
- We can develop an ever-present awareness of the person who is not present, our neighbors, our friends, and our co-workers who do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord!
- With every ministry, we can work with an eye out for those who are not yet here.

b. Radical hospitality not only welcomes newcomers, but makes room for them – not as visitors but as members.

- We can invite a newcomer to our Sunday School class, small group, circle, or choir even though we know that will change the dynamics of the group.
- We can look for people who seem lost in the building and be willing to interrupt our routine so we can show them around.
- If we are in the bathroom washing our hands, we can make a point of saying "hi" and introducing ourselves to whomever it is that may come through the door.
- We can set personal goals for ourselves whenever we come to church – like the goal of talking to two people we don't know before we go home, or like the goal of asking somebody else two questions about their own lives before we start to talk about ourselves.

c. And, of course, hospitality is something that we can practice even outside the walls of church.

- We can look for opportunities, for example, and pray for opportunities, to invite someone who doesn't already have a church home to come along with us some Sunday morning.
- When someone new starts at work or school or someone moves into the neighborhood, in addition to the regular gestures of welcome, let's add: "And if you're looking for a church, I'd be happy to tell you about mine. I love it, and it's meant the world to my family, and we'd love to have you come with us sometime."
- When we know someone is facing a difficulty in their marriage or is suffering the grief of loss, let's not be afraid to say, "We have a support group just for you at our church." Or, "Something that helped me was talking to my pastor. I know he'd be willing to talk to you, too."

d. These simple invitations should come naturally. We have no problem telling others where we get our haircut, where we get our car fixed, where we like to eat. So, when it comes to the thing which concerns the most important relationship we have – our relationship to God through Christ's Church – we should never hesitate to speak.

9) A religion scholar once came to Jesus and asked,  
**"Teacher, which is the greatest law of all?"**  
(Matthew 22:36)

Many of you know this story already. Jesus responded,  
**"The greatest law of all is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second most important law is that you should love your neighbor as yourself."** (Matthew 22:37, 39)

"Love God and love your neighbor," Jesus said, "everything else is just commentary."

a. That's really what all this talk of radical hospitality boils down to: loving the stranger in the same way that we would want strangers to love us.

- Hospitality is more than common politeness to newcomers, name tags for greeters, or a few visitor parking spaces, although these things are important.
- Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare, and work toward the purpose of helping others receive what we have received in Christ.

- Hospitality is a spiritual initiative, the practice of an active and genuine love, a graciousness that has nothing to do with self-interest, an opening of our selves and our church to receive others.

b. Creating a church that embodies that kind of radical hospitality takes every single one of us being responsible for it. In the end, hospitality isn't just the responsibility of the ushers or the greeters – as crucial and important and wonderful as each of those roles is. Radical hospitality becomes real only when each one of us looks and prays for ways to show the love of Jesus Christ to a stranger – inside the church and out.

Jesus has invited us all to join Him in the Kingdom. He died in order to make that invitation possible. The least we can do is extend the invitation to others that He died to extend to us!

Let's practice radical hospitality. Let's do it for Jesus' sake. Open wide the doors that all who will may enter! Amen.