

Radical Hospitality

Luke 19:1-10; Hebrews 12:1-2, 13:1-2

Steve Young

January 22, 2017

In our message today, we're going to talk about hospitality. Not hospitality in the way we typically think of it, but 'radical hospitality', which is the term I'm using to describe the way Jesus practiced hospitality. It is my hope that we at Historic Franklin Presbyterian church will gain insight from and fully embrace radical hospitality as a way of life – a way of "being church", anchored here at five points in beautiful historic downtown Franklin.

To begin, I'd like to share a story:

We were temporary residents of Karaganda, Kazakhstan, in the fall of 2008, halfway through our two-month stay to adopt our first child, Lily Grace. Kazakhstan is an independent nation that used to be a Soviet republic, and lies underneath Russian Siberia and next door to Mongolia and China. You can imagine that living in a strange country that we knew little about, all Russian-speaking with almost no one able to understand English, was daunting. And also left us feeling isolated. Our interpreter, a young college-age woman named Julia, was a Godsend, helping us navigate the many conversations required each day, translating from English to Russian and back again. Along the way, we began to get to know more about Julia, who had learned English to make a better life for herself and her family. When we learned that she still lived at home with her parents, we decided to invite Julia and her mom and dad out to dinner – it seemed like the least we could do with all she was doing for us. Julia was stunned, as apparently no one had ever done this before.

We had a wonderful evening in a local restaurant, getting to know her father, Slava, a driver for a bank executive, her mother, Sveta, an administrative assistant. Julia, of course, served as our interpreter. We found ourselves sharing stories, hopes and dreams and remarking on the realization that we're really all the same, even across cultures and from opposite sides of the world.

Weeks passed, and finally the time to leave Kazakhstan was drawing near. One morning, Julia greeted us with "My family would like to invite you to have dinner with us this Sunday before you leave, if that would be okay." We were touched by the invitation and enthusiastically accepted.

Sunday arrived, and we bundled up 10-month-old Lily Grace to make the drive through the snow and ice to the small apartment in a Soviet-era high-rise where Julia had lived with her parents all her life. When we walked in, we were warmly greeted by Julia, her parents – and her aunt, cousin and grandparents!

Rounding the corner, our jaws dropped. A table that practically filled the whole room had been beautifully set and could barely contain all the bowls and platters of food, many Kazakhstani specialties among them. The family had begun cooking the day before, providing the best they had to celebrate with us.

We were overcome with emotion by this extravagant demonstration of hospitality, deepening bonds between new friends.

In a world so divided, how does this happen? How do bridges get built in spite of it all? I think the answer lies in what it is we're willing to bring to the table.

I first heard the term “radical hospitality” from my friend, The Rev. Todd Jenkins, a Living Waters for the World volunteer leader and former pastor of First Presbyterian Fayetteville, TN, who makes a fascinating observation about Jesus when it comes to hospitality.

Let’s take a look back at the story of Zacchaeus we read earlier. Jesus is passing through Jericho and is being followed by a large crowd, and Zacchaeus, being short like me, climbs a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. At the moment Jesus passes, an unexpected thing happens. Jesus stops, looks right at Zacchaeus up in that tree, and says, Zacchaeus, I’m going to stay at your house today. Did you catch that? Rev. Jenkins points out that, throughout scripture, when Jesus practices hospitality, he goes to your house, not the other way around. Now that’s radical. Picture one of us doing that. Going up to another member here at HFPC and saying I’m going to show you some Southern hospitality – what time should I come over this afternoon for coffee and a visit? Yet that is exactly what Jesus does. Rev. Jenkins goes on to share that the practice of “radical hospitality” as demonstrated by Jesus to those he encountered is “an invitation to deliberation and depth in relationship.” And there it is. “An invitation to depth in relationship”. Jesus isn’t interested in a cup of coffee, Jesus wants to go deep – to have a relationship with us – a life-changing relationship. And when Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus in that tree, he wasn’t really looking at him – he was looking into him. He already knew him. Jesus knew the ugly parts and he knew the yearning Zacchaeus had for something more. And Zacchaeus isn’t the only one scripture tells us about. Think about the woman at the well. What both examples remind us is that when Jesus spends time with someone, shows a person radical hospitality, the recipients of that hospitality – realizing that they are fully known and loved in spite of it all - respond with excitement, with action – they are changed. Zacchaeus gives half of everything he owns to the poor. The woman at the well shrugs off her shame, runs into town and tells everyone she met the savior. She is a changed person.

Welcoming Jesus in this way allows us to let go of the pretensions, the trying to always put a false face on, say and do just the right things, and make it real. And when we make it real, approach others with love and not hide behind the walls of fear we like to put up, we allow others to be fully open as well. And when that happens, both are transformed. That’s what Jesus shows us with his radical hospitality. 16 years ago, a man in his late 30s, recently divorced, with no church home, met Sally Hughes and she encouraged him to visit this church for Sunday services. He took a breath and decided to give it a try. And from the moment he hit the door, folks were friendly, and open, and, sitting in a pew right over there, a man named Gene Tronsen turned around put out his hand, and welcomed the stranger to the church, told him he was glad he was there, and that he hoped he would see him again. He did. He came back, and never stopped. I’ll never forget the hospitality Gene showed me that Sunday and I deeply care about the relationships that I have formed with others over these many years. The welcome was nice, the relationships are what changed me. If we had time, I’d love to stop right now and ask each of you to share your story of radical hospitality here at HFPC.

Sally and Will gave this church a priceless gift. If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times about them – what you see is what you get. They modeled for us the radical hospitality that Jesus is all about. It’s all about what you bring to the table. It’s about who Historic Franklin Presbyterian Church has been and who we are going to be. Being fully open, meeting people where they are, reflecting the light of Christ. Does it matter if we are organized? Absolutely. Does it matter if we have excellent leadership from our session? Of course. Do we need to have a solid transition plan in place? We do. But friends, none of that matters as much as who we are with each other and with everyone person we meet – particularly those who come to visit. Not perfect, not all buttoned-up, but real. Open. What you see is what you get, because God already knows us fully.

The opportunities lie around every corner. Eight years ago, strangers from the other side of the world became friends, sharing bonds of love in the context of radical hospitality and Tonya and I are forever changed by it. Today, Julia is married with a little girl of her own – some of those shared hopes and dreams fulfilled.

Historic Franklin Presbyterian Church stands ready, arms open, for what tomorrow brings. This day and every day, with loved ones near and far, may we experience and practice the radical hospitality made possible by God's grace.

Steve Young, January 2017