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Scripture: Matthew 25:34-45

Theme: Radical Hospitality

September 13th, 2020

As we begin our new sermon series, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, we must begin with a question. Why is looking at the practices of our church important? Some may answer because the church is in decline and we need new members and younger folks to carry the mantle of the work our community has begun. Others may answer because our motto as United Methodists is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Some of you may answer with a favorite scripture verse or talk about a personal experience of why you continue to come to church. Those are all great answers and answers that show you care about this community, but I believe we can ask follow-up question, what is the church? Is it simply these four walls? Is it programs and events we hold? Is it people? These are all questions we will delve into in the coming weeks as we explore the five practices Bishop Robert Schnase finds important to church vitality and church growth.

Several years ago, when I was in college, a college girlfriend and I were making a little extra money and wanted to share a bit of our hard-earned cash by spreading some good into the world. It was Christmas time and we knew we could spend our money on a family member or each other, but this year we wanted to do something different. The Resident Advisors were starting an Angel Tree and we went to the little tree where all the strands of papers were hanging with each family or child's name on them. The slip of paper told you what gifts they wanted, what gifts they needed, and the sizes of all clothing and shoes. We picked off one of the pieces of paper and found typical items of what a family in need would request.

We saw items like shoes with sizes, specifications on dress shoes or casual wear, and we saw clothing sizes no doubt placed by caring mothers and fathers who knew what their kids really needed. There were items that were school related like backpacks, lunch boxes, and other specific classroom items. However, there was one item that stood out with this child's list. It was a brand-new bike. This item

stood out because in parenthesis there was an explanation on why they wanted this bike. Many of their friends had new bikes as they had all grown up and their old bike was too small for them now that they were growing up and in late elementary school. They used their bike to play in the summer and explore the neighborhood where they lived. We knew we had to go above and beyond and find a way to get this kid a bike, because it was going to make their Christmas, which was the whole purpose of us doing this. It was to make sure someone else knew they were cared for and they were loved.

At first glance, Jesus' words in Matthew come off as rather harsh. He is talking about what sounds like judgment day and does not sound good for those who did not practice radical hospitality. When we look deeper and reflect more on what is being said, we understand Jesus is not trying to place the fear of God in us as much as we think here. This section of Matthew, Matthew 24-25, is known for its apocalyptic nature. In Matthew 24, Jesus leaves the Temple and the disciples immediately point out all the buildings surrounding the Temple, which prompts Jesus to respond by saying, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2).

Following this apocalyptic statement, Jesus and his disciples go to the Mount of Olives and the disciples, who are probably questioning this statement Jesus just made, ask Jesus, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus continues with talking about natural disasters, famines, and wars (Matthew 24:6-7), prophecies of destruction (Matthew 24:15), being cautious of false messiahs and false prophets (24: 23-24), and much, much more about all these terrible things. This apocalyptic discourse was quite common in Jewish theology and scripture, but by the time we get to Matthew 25, you just hope the disciples go get Jesus a margarita and tell him to take breath. Maybe we are missing the point of what Jesus is really saying here though.

Jesus begins referencing himself as the Son of Man (Matthew 24:30-44). He goes on by telling a few parables and all these parables have a connected theme of someone else completing some type of task for another. When we get to our passage of scripture we read today, Jesus begins framing himself as not just the Son of Man, but as a shepherd and a king who separates those who have served others. Jesus, although quite indirectly and in a confusing manner, focuses on

servicing others and that servicing others is a blessing and how we receive blessings. Jesus says, "The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for when I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" Matthew 25:34-36). The righteous answer that they had, in fact, done all of these things because they saw a need and they responded to the need they saw in front of them.

In his notes on this scripture, John Wesley, "All these works of outward mercy supposed faith and love, and must needs be accompanied with spiritual mercy" (Wesley's Notes <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.ii.xxvii.html>). Wesley understands the message here by seeing as the world implodes around us, Jesus calls us to be the gospel in the world to provide hope and to meet the needs of those we see around us. We should not fill all our time with asking questions like the disciples, "Well when will this end? When will these things come to pass? Why will they happen?" Radical Hospitality is being in the world and meeting people in their needs. We are not meant to cast judgment on why people got into this situation. We do not need to ask the question why they feel like they are helpless and why they cannot pick themselves up by their own bootstraps and trudge on. Instead, we are called to offer a helping by providing food and drink, provide a lonely person company, and look a stranger in the eyes and say, "Welcome! You are safe here, friend, what is it you need?" (Matthew 25:35-36).

In his book, Bishop Schnase describes a situation he encountered while giving pastoral care in a hospital. An elderly man's wife had passed in a terrible accident and the doctor asked him to accompany him to tell the husband she had passed. They handed over her possessions, their wedding ring, her favorite necklace, her eyeglasses, and they did their best to provide comfort in this man's grief. They asked who could come and give him a ride home and be with him, and he replied, "No one." He and his wife had moved to the city three years ago and did not know their neighbors like at their old home. They were both retired and all his co-worker friends lived states away. In fact, his family was scattered about the country as well and he had no one but her (Schnase p.19). There are more people than you think in this world that lack a community like the one we have here. A community which loves each other and goes above and beyond for each other in time of grief and loss. I know when my mother, my sisters, and I walked into our

what we now consider our home church in Tennessee, we felt broken, exposed, and fearful of a new community and new faces, but we were welcomed with open arms and love. It was radical hospitality that kept us returning.

Bishop Schanase defines radical hospitality like this, "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" (Schnase p. 11). Bishop Schnase refers to hospitality as a mark of our discipleship and our fruitfulness as a body of Christ (p. 12). Throughout the gospels, the disciples are trying to put up borders in Jesus' way saying, these people are too sick and might make you sick, these people are too old or too young to take time out of your day to speak and listen to them we have better things to do, these people are too crippled, too blind, or too possessed by demons, you can't possibly save them! However, Jesus always seems to go above and beyond whenever he can because he knows practicing radical hospitality is practicing the good news.

Radical Hospitality is not meant to be a social club, another organization where monthly dues are necessary, nor is it simply another town club. Radical hospitality is not putting on a bigger smile to a stranger who walks through the doors or being more polite to those we don't like and thinking your work is done. Radical hospitality is about pushing ourselves beyond the barriers that hold us back, connecting with one another in our sin and shortcomings, and showing each other our humanity. It is using your gifts, your talents, and your strengths to grow the table and welcome others to participate. Radical hospitality is about seeing the needs of our church and the needs of our community and doing something about it instead of complaining or waiting on someone else to come along to fix them. Radical hospitality is a discipline and a way of being in the world, just like Jesus was for us.

If I am being honest church, I am new to your community. I am not sure what Radical Hospitality looks like for us, but I do know this to be true. We must create it. We must be it. We must show our community there is still something worth fighting for in a day and age where our world seems to be bursting at the seams. Our world needs our radical hospitality. Our community needs our radical hospitality. They need us to see their needs and respond. They need us to see their humanity and show them they are cared for and loved. We have to figure this out

together in a time of Covid where it seems like everything is new or challenging. Let us embrace this challenge as a hope-filled people as a people rooted in the Gospel of Love with our Radical Hospitality of embracing everyone for who they are and where they are at. Are we up to the challenge?

In conclusion, we ended up buying that bike for the Angel Tree child. We didn't buy the bike because we wanted others to know how good we were. We didn't buy the bike because we wanted to check it off a list of good deeds at the end of the year. We did it because we wanted to show a stranger they were loved, they are worthy, and this situation they are facing does not define them for the rest of their lives.

We didn't know it at the time, but we were practicing Radical Hospitality. It takes someone reaching out and going above and beyond to show people the radical love of Jesus. It takes us moving out of our comfort zones and being willing to build relationships with those who may have no one else in their lives and need our community. It takes us, the church, to be there for our community and tell people you are loved, you are worthy of love, and we are going to show you love. This is Radical Hospitality and this is the Radical Love of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.