

Why Are We Here? Radical Hospitality!

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Happy New Year! Before I read our scripture this morning, I have a couple of things I would like to say to you. First of all, about Christmas Eve: We agonized about having the service, and I want you to know that we did not make that decision lightly. The Pastoral Leadership Team and I thought about it, prayed about it, and it was all a “go” until two o'clock in the afternoon, when the ice fell. It was a unanimous decision that we would not have the service, to keep you safe. But ultimately, that is my decision. And I made that with a very heavy heart, but with a desire to keep our people safe. So, I just wanted you to know that we don't make those decisions lightly. The second thing I want to address: those of you who were praying for a white Christmas! Number one, I want you on my prayer team for two reasons. Number one, you are effective! And number two, I want to teach you how to pray specifically for snow and not white, because ice is white, too, and it was the ice that got us!

This passage of scripture comes from Romans, chapter 15. As we start a new year, I always like to begin by reminding us of who we are and why we are here. We're going to be talking about hospitality this morning: to one another, and also to the stranger. As I read this passage, this whole section where Paul is talking about how we are to bear with one another, and accept one another, and help one another, and encourage one another, and be united even within our diversity, I want you to listen for hospitality and how it rings through this entire section. This is Romans, chapter 15, verses 1 through 10.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For everything that is written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promise made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and I will sing hymns to your name.” Again, it says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” May God bless the reading of His Word.

Today we are talking about hospitality and I'm going to be putting two words together that you often don't hear together, and that is “radical hospitality.” But growing, thriving, fruitful congregations practice radical hospitality. They are intentional. They love one another with a passion, and they love others with a passion, as well. I've used this statement before, and some of you wanted to throw something at me. It's okay. Let me finish it. Churches who love one another don't grow; it's churches that love others that

grow. I have seen churches that loved one another with a passion, that you couldn't break in with a jackhammer. It's churches that love others with a passion that grow.

I want to tell you a couple of stories about hospitality and anti-hospitality. A long time ago, in a land far away, Mississippi Gulf Coast. Back in the olden days, there were no casinos on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. as there are today. And Highway 90 ran on inhibited along the entire coast. Most of the length of the coast, there was Highway 90, and then a parking area, and then a stretch of sand, and then a boardwalk, and then the beach, and then the Gulf. And all spring, all summer, and all fall, almost every week, if you drove that stretch, you would find a huge tent somewhere along that area. How many of you have ever been to a tent revival? Some of you have. Some of you know what I'm talking about. It's an open-air tent revival. They used to be extremely popular. In fact, there were evangelists that had their own tents! They would set up between Highway 90 and the boardwalk, because along Highway 90 there was a sidewalk that had a lot of foot traffic. And on the boardwalk, there was a lot of foot traffic. And the idea was to have a witness to the community with an open-air tent revival, but also to encourage people that were just walking by to come in. This particular tent revival, the evangelist was preaching and there were two young ladies walking along the boardwalk who decided to stop in and listen. And they were dressed very appropriately for walking on the boardwalk on the beach during the summer in Mississippi. Do I have to go any further? Okay. They came in and sat down. The evangelist noticed them come in and sit down and he stopped. This is what he said. He said, "I'm going to ask a very unusual question." He said, "Is there a butcher in the house?" And people looked around, like "What?" He said, "You heard me. Is there a butcher in the house?" And a guy kind of sheepishly raised his hand. And he said, "Oh, good." And he pointed to these two ladies, and he said, "Because there's two heifers that just walked in that need dressing." I've often wondered if those two young ladies ever went back to church.

The next story comes from my first church in the West, on the Columbia River at Rainier, Oregon. There was a lady in the church who was diagnosed with cancer. Her son lived about 45 to 50 minutes away in Portland. He started coming out on the weekends, spending the weekend with her, and taking care of her, and he would bring her to church. Her cancer progressed, and the time came that she was no longer able to come to church, but he continued to come to church. After about a year, maybe a little bit more, she passed away, and I thought, "Well, that's probably the last time we will see him." But he kept coming, and he kept coming, and he kept coming. And after about a year, I couldn't help myself. I said, "Man, I am so delighted that you have continued to drive 45 to 50 minutes one way to attend our church. But I've got to ask. You drive by two dozen churches on your way here. Why do you continue to come here?" And I will never forget his answer. He said, "Pastor, there are two places on the planet where I can be myself and I don't have to pretend to be something else, and that is in the privacy of my own home and in this church." And that is the greatest compliment I have ever heard a church get in my life.

Vital, fruitful, growing congregations practice radical hospitality. They create places where people can be at home and where they feel comfortable. Growing churches have as much passion for strangers as they have for each other. Yes, we must love each other, but we

must have a passion for our community. Growing, vital churches have a passion for one another. They have a unity within their diversity, and they have a passion for reaching their community for Jesus Christ. They go out of their way to meet the needs of the strangers among them, and meet the needs of their community. Our scripture talks about how Jesus Christ put other people's needs ahead of His own, and we ought to follow His example. And, by the way, the mission statement of this church encourages us to do exactly that: to make disciples of Jesus Christ, by loving them where they are and leading them to Christ. Making disciples of Jesus Christ by going out of our way, by doing so intentionally, by getting the church out of the church and into the community and getting the community into the church. We have dedicated ourselves to doing that very thing and you'll see that our calendar is filling up with community events, events to get people into our church. Since I've been around, since I've known anything about Central, this church has done a very good job helping mature Christians grow in their faith. You've always done a very good job of that. What we are working on now is providing a space and an opportunity for non-Christians, for nominal Christians, and for new Christians to land and not be intimidated, where they can grow in their faith. You'll see that there are all kinds of events for encouraging the community to come in and be comfortable being here, where we can have an impact on them. Just a few moments ago, Aaron mentioned Game Night. When was the last time you had a Game Night? And, folks, there's going to be people here playing games that aren't cribbage. (That's supposed to be funny, but I guess it's not!) They're going to be playing games you may not have ever seen and you may not like, but we're trying to get those people in here. There's going to be people here that don't look like you, who don't sound like you, and don't smell like you. And that's the intention: to intentionally make disciples of Jesus Christ. How? By loving people where they are and as they are and how they are, when they don't look like us, they don't sound like us, they don't smell like us. I don't know about you, but I have a very hard time having a positive impact on people I have alienated. You do not beat people into submission; you love them into acceptance. It's not our job to point out people's faults. I'm gonna get me a t-shirt or a hat one day that says, "Love them all. Let God sort 'em out." That means that everyone is welcome here. That means that the LBGTQ community is welcome here, and that means that people who believe that that lifestyle is a sin are welcome here, people like us and people unlike us, to intentionally love them where they are and lead them to Christ.

When we speak of leading people to Christ, we often think of getting them saved and getting them some fire insurance. But people need Jesus Christ for much more than fire insurance. There are three questions that we as individuals, and we as a church, must know the answers to. Number one: Why do people need Jesus Christ? Number two: Why do they need the church? And number three: Why do they need this church?

Why do they need Jesus Christ? He's the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Savior of the world, the way, the truth, and the life. Yes! And more than that, He addresses the human condition. He transforms lives. He fills the deepest longing of our hearts. He drives out the darkness of the world. What Jesus does is He enables human beings to reach their God-given potential. The last two Sundays, Aaron and I have talked about Jesus showing us who God is, but He does much more than that. He shows us what we have the potential of being. We need Jesus Christ, and our community needs Jesus

Christ for much more than fire insurance, to enable us to have life and to have it more abundantly.

Why do we need the church? The church is the very incarnation of Jesus Christ in the community. In us, they should see Christ. We can do so much more together than we can do apart, and the Scripture tells us that each of us is gifted to add to the Body, to enable the Body to be what God has created it to be.

Now, why do they need this church? This church was created to be unique. Not weird. There's a difference! We were created to be unique. If you've been around for a while, you know that I love to dig around in the archives. Guess where I've been? I've learned a lot about this church by digging around in the archives. Several months ago now, I shared something I found down there. It was about the founding of Central United Protestant Church. And I love the phrase where it says that the government built two churches: They built the Catholic Church and the "everybody else" church. And I love that because that is us. We were created to be unique. We were created to be the "everybody else" church. Now, do you know someone who is "everybody else"? We were not created to be a United Methodist Church, though we are governed by the United Methodists. We were not created to be a Baptist church; we were not created to be a Presbyterian church; we were not created to be a Lutheran church; we were not created to be an Episcopal church; we were not created to be a "Two Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Snake-handling Baptist church." But we were created to be a church where Methodists felt comfortable, and Baptists felt comfortable, and Lutherans felt comfortable, and Episcopalians felt comfortable, and Charismatics felt comfortable, and Two Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Snake-handling Baptists feel comfortable, as long as they leave their snakes outside! We were created to be an inclusive church where all of God's children feel comfortable. You know what I have found out by reading the history of this church, and studying the history of this church, and reading in the archives? When this church embraced its inclusive nature, its unique nature, it thrived. Thrived! And when it stopped, it began to decline. That may be hard to hear, but that is a fact.

Our community, the Tri-Cities, needs this church. Let me say that again. This community, the Tri-Cities, needs this church. People are longing for a place where there is unity within diversity, a place where people don't have to pick sides, a place where they don't have to hide who they are or that they are a mess, a place where they don't have to pretend to be perfect, a place where they are not judged but welcomed, a place where they are loved and not condemned. In short, they need a place to call home. That's us. That's us. That's why we are the church for everybody else. And if that means being the church for everybody else, those that nobody else wants, so be it.

Now, I am told that New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are the times you're supposed to do resolutions. I don't like resolutions and I'll tell you why. Because if it's good enough to resolve to do on New Year's Day, it should have been done a long time ago. Am I right? But today, as your pastor, I am rededicating myself to promoting, encouraging, and embodying radical hospitality, and I am inviting you to join me. Let me say that again. I am rededicating myself to promoting, encouraging, and embodying radical

hospitality, radical welcome, and I am inviting you to join me. I was going to ask for a big Amen at this point, but I'm not going to, and I'll tell you why: because I don't want some of you to lie. But if you are willing to join me, dedicating yourself to radical hospitality this year, you say Amen in your heart. Just understand: if you don't mean it, you're not lying to me, you're lying to God. So, let's pray.

God, You have heard our hearts. We want to reach our community for Jesus Christ. We want to be a home for people who need You. So, Lord, we dedicate ourselves to doing just that. Help us to embody radical hospitality. In Christ's name, amen.