

Oct 5 – World Communion Sunday Radical Hospitality

Hebrews 13:1-3

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a time when we deliberately call to mind that we are a global church and when I say church I mean more than United Methodists but all Christians worshipping this day. We gather at the Lord's Table remembering all are welcomed at this table. The settings for worship will vary from great medieval cathedrals to a thatched roofed structure with no walls and from thousands worshipping together to just two or three. As I was reflecting on the meaning of this day, and it was intentionally started by the World Council of Churches to celebrate what unites us as churches instead of focusing on what separates us, as is usually the case, I thought about this scripture from Hebrews. Some of the key phrases are: Love each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests. You might entertain angels unawares. The writer of Hebrews was remembering a story from the time of Abraham. He was sitting by his tent when he noticed three strangers walking past on the road. He invites them in, provides for their needs and learns that they are the angels of God. This encounter has always been a symbol of the challenge to practice radical hospitality. It was essential in Biblical times. There were no hotels or restaurants. When people had to travel they needed the hospitality of the people of the cities and towns. Without it they would be left to fend for themselves and in those often lawless places the results would be tragic. Abraham's story was a reminder to not just practice radical hospitality but to see within it a blessing, not just for the people being helped but for you as well.

Thinking about all of this I have been pondering what it means, as people of faith, to practice this kind of hospitality on a global, regional and local level. As I share my thoughts I will say that these are mine alone, not the official stand of the United Methodist Church and you are free to disagree with them.

When we think globally, it is really hard to imagine radical hospitality in a time of such religious extremism. We hear about some of the horrific things ISSL is doing and it would be easy to label all Muslims as terrorists. Yet, personally I have known many in the Islamic faith who are peace loving and are as appalled by what is being done in the

name of their faith as we. To reach out in peace in such an environment is risky and perhaps, at least at times, foolhardy. Yet we are a global church rubbing elbows with people of a variety of faiths and we need to find ways to live and work together.

Even when it comes to other Christians it is hard, at least at times, to practice radical hospitality. Too often I have seen a “we are better than they” mentality by those of us who live in Europe or Northern America. We reach out with a sense of entitlement instead of in mutuality. We do not always ask what others have to teach us and give to us. Radical hospitality, globally within a Christian context, is to love each other as family, as the writer of Hebrew’s said. And when I say this I am saying we should see ourselves as siblings with Christ as our head, not that we are the older parent helping the child which is often how our reaching out to others around the world has been experienced.

When we think of what Radical Hospitality means in a national or regional way, I think we have much room for growth. Most of you can remember the images we saw this summer. I, as I am sure many of you, was shocked by what I saw. Images of angry people trying to keep buses of children away from detention centers are less than hospitable acts. Over our history as a nation we have put the Chinese behind barbed wire in San Francisco to contain them and protect us. There were signs No Irish Allowed in many places back east during the late 1800’s. I served the church in Connell, Washington and they were still telling the stories of the community’s reaction to the predominantly German population at beginning of WW I. I understand the need for immigration laws. Yet I also understand that strident words of “you are not welcome” is not the response that we are called to have as Christians. The balance between security of our borders and our response to the needy of the world is difficult if not impossible to maintain but these words from Hebrews reminds us that we cannot turn a blind eye to the harsh rhetoric of non-welcoming and must stand up and say no, this does not include me.

When we move to our response as individuals and a church to the stranger it is still a challenge to practice radical hospitality. Think about what we do to get ready for an anticipated guest? Think about all the preparation and cleaning and planning we go

through. Why do we do this? We want our guest to know they are welcome. We want them to know that we are glad that they have come for a visit. What would it look like on Sunday if we did the same thing here? Too often how we present ourselves on a Sunday is not quite radical hospitality. We have the people who volunteer to welcome. That is great but then we often think we don't have to do anything more. We know that isn't the case. Each of us is to see every person who walks through our door as a part of our family. Someone we are glad to see, even anticipating. When we relate to them in this way what does it mean?

We should come each day expecting to entertain angels unawares. If we think of every guest that comes to visit us here at TUMC as an angel sent by God that changes everything, doesn't it? We can always talk to our friends but this might be the only chance we get to talk to an angel! You get my idea. We should come with the intent to put our guests first. Did you put on your name tag today so your guests would know you?

Second, it requires our being open to all, especially to those who are different from us. And I use the term different in its broadest sense. Different could be age, race, or income to mention a few. But it could be even be those who have lived in the northwest a long time opposite to those who just moved here; or those who worked in offices and those who worked outside; those who served in the military and those who didn't. There is the old saying "birds of a feather flock together." Unfortunately there is more truth in that than we might think. We tend to be attracted to people who have similar backgrounds to us. We are more likely to greet people who, on first impression, seem to be like us instead of people whom we register as being way different. To practice radical hospitality is to intentionally reach out first to those whom our brain says are different. And when we do, we again find that often we are talking to angels. Everyone has a unique and wonderful story and the more we are willing to engage and listen, the better. This means actively breaking down barriers that separate us.

When I think of this I am reminded of Vivian in one of my former churches. She was the church historian, like our Margie. We asked her to come and share with the confirmation class a bit of the history, which she did. Then she stayed around to visit

with the kids. She learned that one of the activities of that day was going up to the clock face in the bell tower. Her husband had been keeper of the clock for many years and had never allowed her to go up in the tower. You had to climb a ladder about twelve feet before reaching the first floor and then other stairs and ladders up into the tower. She had always wanted to go. She asked the kids if they would help her get to the top of the tower. She was almost 90 at the time. All of the kids thought this was awesome and we all worked to help her. She took great joy in getting there and signing her name along with so many others who had made the journey. After that Vivian was a special friend of that whole group of kids and they almost to a one would talk with her each week as they came to church. That is breaking down barriers.

Finally to practice radical hospitality requires risks in relationships. As we know we may not always entertain angels unawares. Sometimes we find less than angelic responses to our reaching out. But we are reminded that the risks are worth it.

So remember this day and every day we have guests among us. We are to treat them like beloved family. As we do we, as well as they, will be blessed and who knows we might encounter one of God's angels.