

**Preparing for Company:
The Practice of Radical Hospitality
November 25, 2007
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I hope you all had a great Thanksgiving! I'd like to take a quick poll here. How many of us in the room today hosted company over Thanksgiving?...maybe for just the Thanksgiving dinner, or maybe out of town guests stayed for a few days. We love having company at our house, but you know, it's a lot of work, isn't it? There's the planning...who's going to sleep where? What are we going to eat? Then there's the preparation: cleaning and making beds and shopping. Then there's the work: cooking, cleaning up, doing laundry, plunging toilets, whatever it takes, right? It's a lot of work to have company! You know the saying, "it's good to have company, but it's great to see them leave!"

Like I said, we love having company! My mother and father in law are in the house today, and I want them to know that we love having them stay with us – and it doesn't matter to us at all that you're very high maintenance! Now that's a joke, and it really isn't true. My side of the family is coming after Christmas...I think that is going to be high maintenance! But my in-laws are great, low-maintenance, company. Still, it is true, is it not, that having company means making some changes and putting their needs ahead of your own? It means doing things differently. Your daily routine might be to eat bran flakes for breakfast, but if you have company, I hope you're planning to do a little something extra for breakfast. You anticipate and plan for the needs of your company, then you change your home and life to serve them. Isn't that what it takes, minimally, to be a good host?

On the upside of having company, look at what our preparation and our sacrifice make possible. A time to reconnect with loved ones, renew our relationships. To us at our house, the work of having company is greatly exceeded by the pleasure of having company.

Today we're going to take a look at the Biblical picture of hospitality, which is an essential trait or characteristic of a thriving congregation. We're coming up on a time of the year when we have lots of guests here at Saint Paul's, so it is timely that we talk about this now. But please don't think that this is just a seasonal thing. Vital congregations who share the life-changing message of Jesus cannot afford to be intermittent, or haphazard about hospitality. We must be consistently conscience of the guests who are with us. That presents us with lots of challenges. Just like in our homes, we need to be prepared, need to anticipate needs, and we need to be adaptable – to change our way of doing things to make sure that the message of God's love for our guest is communicated through our actions. But it also means that we have incredible opportunities to help people experience God's love for them – and that is exciting...that is mission fulfilling stuff!

So let's start today by taking a look at the **Biblical Picture of Hospitality**.

Hospitality comes from the greek, and it means "love for the stranger". So in a Biblical sense, hospitality is different than having company in our homes. It is not just about those that we already know and love, it is for anyone!

Remember that Jesus once said, "what good is it to love those that love you? Anyone can do that." Hospitality is not about loving those that we already know, or that we're more comfortable with. It's not about welcoming those who look or act or dress like us. True hospitality is very challenging to live out because it overrides those distinctions we like to make!

Hospitality is a big theme throughout the Bible. Paul reminds the church in his letter to the Hebrews: ***Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*** (Heb 13:2). We see examples of hospitality all over the Bible, and we receive commands in scripture, like this one, to be hospitable to others.

Bishop Robert Schnase talks about radical hospitality in a chapter of his book, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. (Abingdon Press, 20007). Listen to his description of Hospitality (pg 11-12); ***It [hospitality] describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors to accommodate the needs of receive the talents of newcomers.***"

Do you hear what is inside of these words? *Not yet part of the faith community* should remind us that a huge part of our mission is for people we don't even know yet! *Willingness to change behaviors...*"What you talking about? Why do I have to change? Why don't they change? I was here first! It works for me" Hospitality is about making it work for someone else. As Bishop Schnase writes, it is about accommodating the needs and receiving the talents of newcomers.

Why is hospitality such a strong theme in the Bible, and why in the world is it so important that we, the church, should examine our attitudes and our actions and be open to change for it?

One reason is because **hospitality is an essential part of God's Nature!** And if we are going to present a true reflection of God to others, then we need to be serious about hospitality. God is a gracious and loving God. So loving, in fact, that he loves you and me just as we are.

Think about the way you experience God's welcome. When you are turning to God and you feel broken or unworthy or insignificant because of your sin, what is God's immediate response? I think it is acceptance. And more than just acceptance, God is willing to go extreme measures to make sure you know that you are loved. That's why this message is about radical hospitality. There is nothing tame or normal about God's love for us. God went to extreme measures to demonstrate is love and acceptance of us.

It's not just that God's hospitality is radical because of the extreme demonstration of his love on the cross, it is also because God is extremely lavish with his invitation to come experience his love. Jesus tells a parable about a King who is holding a wedding banquet and he sends out invitations to the normal crowd. But the RSVP's all come back as regrets, because they are busy. So the King says to his slaves, ***Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.*** **Matthew 22:8-9.** The point Jesus is trying to make is that God's offer is not just for the dutiful and respectable people. It is for anyone and everyone who will respond to the invitation.

God is constantly at work, drawing people to come experience his grace, love, forgiveness. And if people experience God's Spirit nudging them to draw closer to him, where are they going to go to do that? The church! Right. Isn't that what we are supposed to be, the embodiment of God's presence on this earth? So we need to do hospitality well because it is part of God's nature, and because it **communicates God's Love.**