

“Radical Hospitality”

James 3:13 & 4:3, 7 & 8a

Mark 9: 30 & 37

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Over the past couple of years, The Park Church congregation has been working to identify its particular place and ministry in the community. One way to articulate the aim of our ministry is that we attempt to care for a community’s soul. It appears that one of the best ways we can do that is by means of our hospitality. And we are in good company in that effort. There is perhaps no more important long-standing religious value than hospitality. There are countless places in the Old and New Testaments that tell of the importance of hospitality in the overall scheme of life. We would be hard-pressed to find any issue that is more central to our theology than hospitality. This theme continues with emphasis in the Gospel accounts and in the letters that were written to early Christian communities. Many of these letters have been included in our New Testament.

Today we read first from the Letter of James, one of the most practical in all of Scripture. This particular passage is about wisdom and its connection to peacemaking. Over and over again the Letter of James makes the point that any beliefs we hold, but neglect to practice in daily life, are not worth much. We read these words, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

This peaceful wisdom is then contrasted with bitter envy and selfish ambition. “For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” It is clear that James is concerned about the integrity of the community, and wants to see it working for peace rather than destruction. It’s pretty easy to find many examples of the effects of envy and selfish ambition in our world today.

Our second reading today came from the Gospel of Mark. Mark contains the simplest and most direct account of the stories and gospel of Jesus, so it may also be seen as practical. In Mark, all the trappings have been removed so that the message jumps out at the reader. In today’s reading, Jesus makes it clear that service to one another constitutes the heart and soul of the community, and that such an attitude of service best responds to the commands of God. Whenever Jesus teaches the disciples about his own impending sacrifice, they tend to get sidetracked into worrying about worldly issues & like which of them is the greatest.

In the spirit of divine Wisdom, Jesus turns conventional attitudes upside down. Not only does he tell them that the last will be first, and the first last, he also focuses their attention on the spiritual value of receiving or welcoming children. This is so characteristic of Jesus. He stuns his hearers into challenging all the beliefs they have come to hold. He does this so that the message and love of God can be born in people’s consciousness. In order to appreciate just how stunning this particular reference would be to Jesus’ hearers, it helps us to remember how children were regarded in that culture.

Remember: along with women and cattle, children were considered to be property. They had no social standing whatsoever. To require people of faith to care for their own children was understandable to them. They took care of all their property the same way. But the word Jesus uses to communicate a new understanding to them is much more personal. He calls upon his disciples "To receive and to welcome children". This is a call to regard children as integral to the community in a way that makes them participants in the ongoing giving and receiving that is characteristic of any healthy community. We can move our understanding a step further by affirming that children are not only important for who they are; but they also stand as symbols of all people who are disenfranchised, rejected, or held in judgment by the community.

At other times, Jesus refers to children as being the epitome of the kingdom of God. According to Jesus, children teach us how to live with curiosity, wonder, openness, and hope. So, to receive and welcome the children benefits the community perhaps even more than it benefits the child. From this perspective we can deepen our understanding of hospitality, recognizing its radical nature. So, not only do our children need exposure to the human experience of faith, we require their innate perspectives, as well. Such mutuality is the essence of radical hospitality.

You might already know that hospitality is one of the oldest traditions found in the Old Testament. We have heard about Abraham's decision to extend hospitality to the strangers who turned out to be angels of God. This act of hospitality ultimately resulted in the conception and birth of Isaac.

In the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, popular notions about their particular sinful acts aside, it is actually the violation of the rules of hospitality that gets those cities into such trouble. Another way to say it is that whenever we treat human beings as objects that are used to meet our desires, we manifest the essence of inhospitality. Throughout Scripture we find references to the importance of hospitality to strangers and service to all who suffer, without considering their social or religious status in the community. It appears true that any open community tends to become more restrictive over time. Lines become established that delineate who is "In" or who is "Out". Jesus consistently challenged those lines of exclusion. In this context, the hospitality of Jesus must be seen as a radical hospitality. It is not simply about taking in strangers. It is not primarily about giving handouts. The radical hospitality of Jesus means to receive all people, welcoming them and treating them as unique embodiments of the image of God. And it means learning something from them.

With regard to our children, they are not our possessions ó they are our teachers. Strangers who come into our midst do not represent simple opportunities for us to fulfill our religious obligations. No, they represent opportunities for our learning and growth. Those who are ill and dying are not just in need of our compassion ó they are our guides along the very paths we, too, will inevitably walk at some time in our lives. The poor are not just the occasions for us to donate our excess ó they are, for us, flesh and blood examples of how to live without the encumbrances of too much "Stuff".

How, then, are we to "Put out the welcome mat"? How do we make the "Sign" on our "Spiritual Inn" read, "Vacancy", so that we can invite people in, not only to visit, but also to participate fully in the community? I suppose one choice might be simply to put out said sign and then wait

for people to show up. Another option is to make hospitality a focal point of the mission of this church. One way you have already done that is through becoming an "Open and Affirming congregation."

More, however, is required. Yes, you guessed it, I'm referring to the dreaded "E-word" of evangelism.

Let me explain the difference between hospitality and evangelism. To be hospitable means to be willing to open the door when someone knocks. When we add evangelism to hospitality we get radical hospitality. This means communicating directly to people that this is a place where all people are invited to find meaning, hope, and life.

So, if you embark on a path of radical hospitality, who might you approach? Where would you go to find the disenfranchised, the sick, the confused, the overwhelmed, the hungry, the thirsty, the young, the outcast, the uneducated?

How would you let them know that you don't just want to help them? How would you demonstrate that you want them to be fully participating members of this community? How Jesus approached the disciples is how Jesus approaches us. In the face of their own concerns about how well they were doing and about who was the greatest, Jesus focused them on the little ones. The little ones were not going to fill the coffers of Jesus and his band of disciples. The little ones were not born to give them any increased social status. The little ones were not going to convince the Pharisees or the Sadducees or the doctors of the law that they were missing the whole point of the Gospel.

But for those who could see and for those who could hear and appreciate the message that Jesus brought, the little ones represented the essence of hope for the community. By saying this I don't mean that the children will grow up to fix everything. I do mean that how the children look at life, how they trust, and how they enter into loving relationships, offers us a level of hope beyond most human imagining. If we are to live fully as people of God we cannot afford to ignore any opportunities for service or any opportunities to learn more about God's love. This is the value of radical hospitality.

It seems to me that I spend a good deal of time and energy articulating this theme. Perhaps I choose to emphasize it more because I see so much happening in our world today that undermines the willingness of people to be hospitable. We are being taught to be afraid of strangers. We're being taught by our political institutions to be more wary of those we deem to be aliens. We are being taught to judge people by the color of their skin, the size of their bank account, or the name of their religion or their God. We are being taught that we have an obligation to mold our children into the people we want them to be instead of supporting them to become full and unique embodiments of the image of God. These pressures exist at every level of modern society. It is rampant in government, business, education, and, unfortunately, even religion.

Our challenge is to hear and believe the Gospel and to act on what we believe. The hope of this church and the hope of the world depend on it.