

Radical Outreach and Hospitality

Romans 15:7; Hebrews 13:2

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Before Easter, we spent some weeks exploring “core values” of the church. In the coming weeks, we’ll look at ways we implement those values. Bishop Robert Schnase, who spoke here a few years ago, emphasizes “five practices of fruitful congregations”: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*; <http://robertschnase.com/books/five-practices-of-fruitful-congregations/>).

Today we’re looking at *Radical Hospitality*. I’m adding the word “outreach” here because the word hospitality alone makes it sound like we just wait for people to show up instead of going to them. There was a time when churches could just open their doors and people would show up. That’s rarely the case today. Most people aren’t loyal to a certain denomination. Some people will venture into a church on their own, but the vast majority of people attend a church for the first time because someone they know invites them. Or, they’re attracted by something the church is doing outside its walls. We need to be out in the community, making God’s love visible. Christians need to be in relationship and conversation with people—one on one and in small groups—helping them come to see what life in Christ could be like for them.

I even found a Bible translation that supports adding “outreach” to “radical hospitality.” (If you search enough translations, you’ll eventually find one that says what you want.) Romans 15:7 says, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (NRSV). Eugene Peterson translates that verse this way in *The Message*: “So reach out and welcome one another to God’s glory. Jesus did it; now *you* do it!”

In that passage, Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to accept and welcome each other, no matter what the other’s background is (Jewish or Gentile). And we have to start where we are. If we can’t accept and

welcome each other in the Body of Christ, how are we going to reach out to and welcome strangers who need to know Christ?

Hospitality is all over the Bible, but another key verse is Hebrews 13:2 —“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Our hospitality and welcome can’t be limited to people we already know, people who are like us. There are strangers to the gospel, strangers to the church who need to be reached and made welcome, accepted and included in the process of being disciples of Jesus.

We may not even realize who’s receiving our hospitality. This verse in Hebrews probably refers to the encounter Abraham and Sarah had with three strangers who came to visit them (Gen 18). They welcomed those three strangers, invited them to stay, and prepared a meal for them. The visitors announced that within a year Abraham and Sarah would have a son whom they should name Isaac. As the visitors left, Abraham realized that angels, even the LORD himself, had visited him and Sarah. Jesus said that whatever we do for the “least of these,” including welcoming strangers, we do for him (Mt 25:35). We can meet Christ in new ways as we venture out, reach out, and welcome people in his name.

And we’re all called to do this. It’s not something pastors do alone. If you rely on the pastors to do all the ministry in the church, a lot of ministry doesn’t get done. To be a Christian is to be a minister, a servant of the gospel, a witness, a disciple who helps make more disciples.

We can be reluctant to get involved in ministry, to share faith, to reach out and receive new people. Three main reasons we’re reluctant are that we fear rejection, assume inadequacy, and lack motivation (For more on overcoming these areas of resistance, see Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *Shortening the Leap* 163-73). We often hesitate to reach out because we fear rejection. Someone may reject our invitation. But we keep inviting because each time we share faith or invite someone, we’re planting a seed. Each time, the person gives God some attention. They may say “no” twenty times before they say “yes.” We may get to be there when they say yes, or it may be another Christian witness, but every witness, every invitation is important, and God is at work in each encounter.

Christians sometimes hesitate to reach out because we assume inadequacy. We think things like, "I don't know what to say," "What if they ask a question I can't answer," "My life isn't good enough for me to invite someone else." God knows all that and God still chooses to work through weak and fallible people—the only kind of people there are. If we were good enough and knew all the answers, we'd think we were doing it on our own. As it is, we know we have to rely on God's power. And God gives the Holy Spirit to empower us, to give us gifts so we can minister effectively to the people around us. Our weaknesses can be the best places for God's power to shine through. I once heard an interview with former senator Max Cleland, who lost both legs and an arm in a grenade explosion in Viet Nam. Looking back over his experiences since then, he quoted Ernest Hemingway, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are strong at the broken places." Our broken places may be where our greatest witness is given.

A third reason Christians hesitate to reach out and invite is a lack of motivation. But God's Holy Spirit fills us with the love of God and that moves us to care about others and reach out to them. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22).

Another source of motivation is to consider some important questions: Why do people need Christ? Why do people need the Church? Why do people need *this* church? (Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond the Walls* 21). How do you answer those questions?

There are people around us who need Christ and the church. In a five-mile radius around the Durant campus, the population is about 24,000. That's expected to increase by another 1,000 or so in the next five years. In the five-mile radius around Caddo, the population is a little under 2,000. In five years, it's expected to be a little over 2,000. 26% of people in the Durant area say they have no religious affiliation. That doesn't mean they're all non-Christians, but they don't identify with a church or a faith tradition. The Caddo area is almost the same at 24% (information from www.missioninsite.com).

Think about divorce statistics in OK. Despite many efforts to bring the rate down, it remains very high. How does the church help people who are struggling to keep their marriage together or who are recovering from the trauma of divorce? Oklahoma's suicide rate is higher than the national average. And, the suicide rate for veterans is double the rate for non-veterans (<http://okpolicy.org/is-oklahoma-doing-enough-to-help-its-returning-veterans/>). What can the church offer to people who are depressed and hopeless or who live in the aftermath of a loved one's suicide? Many people are dealing with poverty, addictions, and other issues. What does the church offer to people who are trapped in those realities?

We have good news to offer. We have the gift of God's grace given in Jesus. We have hope and compassion and community and purpose and power for living to offer people in need. Let's be motivated and inspired by a vision of many people coming to Christ and finding a place to belong and to serve.

George Hunter, in his book *Radical Outreach*, reminds us that we're to reach people who are hurting and struggling, who are different from us:

Jesus Christ calls his churches to love, believe in, serve, reach out to, welcome, and receive those people and populations that society's "establishment" regards as unlikely or even hopeless, and to deploy their converts in witness and ministry. (41)

Hunter goes on to tell about one of his friends whose grandparents came to faith in Christ through a series of tragedies and struggles and the caring witness of a church. Then he says,

Virtually every person who was raised a Christian could experience that privilege only because some missionary Christians once believed in what an ancestor could become by the grace of God. Every church is entrusted with the opportunity to birth Christward movements in many families for many generations. (65-66)

Isn't that great? Don't you want to be in on something like that?

That's why we're talking about *radical* outreach and hospitality. "Radical" means "to the root." When we engage in this kind of ministry we're getting to the roots of the church. Radical also describes something that's drastically different from ordinary practices, outside the normal, that exceeds expectations and goes the second mile (Schnase, *Cultivating Fruitfulness* 7).

In our witness, our invitation, our outreach, our hospitality, we want to kick it up a notch. Let's get creative, try new things, be persistent and patient, trust God to guide and provide, care more about people outside the church. When we evaluate new programs or efforts, let's ask, "How many will it reach?" not, "How much will it cost?"

The great thing is we don't have to have big flashy events to reach people. The gospel travels best along the network of our relationships and conversations. As we talk to people, our faith and our experience of God's grace will come through. We'll also be intentional about inviting people and about having something to invite people to. What's one good thing about this church that you'd be willing to tell a friend about and invite them to experience it too?

Now, let's say we're out in the community, we're sharing faith and inviting people. New people start showing up. And we already have new people showing up some. What do we do?

In his book *Big Russ and Me*, Tim Russert says that one of the lessons he learned from his father was "show respect to people by speaking to them in their language." The lesson for the church in that is asking, how do we translate the good news so people can understand it? Are we willing to do some new things that will communicate the gospel in ways new people can hear it and respond to it?

Where do we start with all of this? Pray. Pray for God to guide you to people you can reach and pray to be sensitive to opportunities God gives to share and invite. Pray for people you know—friends, relatives, associates, neighbors—and look for opportunities to invite them. Pray for God's gifts to help us practice radical outreach and hospitality.