

March 16, 2014
Matthew 25: 31 – 40

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#digzpc Hospitality

Alright well, since those of us here who were here last Sunday have now mastered simplicity, it's time for us to move on to the next spiritual discipline! Okay, maybe you haven't mastered it yet, but I do hope that you gave it some good thought over the last several days and tried to practice it a bit. It was cool to see what folks were saying this week and fun to see some of those things on the video.

As I mentioned last week these spiritual disciplines are there to try and put us in a position in which the Spirit of God can work. Like a farmer, we till the soil, we put the soil in the ground and then water it, but ultimately it's up to God to make the seed grow. So, when we practice something like simplicity we are putting ourselves in a place in which the Spirit of God can come in and help us to grow.

And as I was thinking about, and trying to practice, simplicity this week I realized that one of the gifts of simplicity is that it allows us space to simply be. Again, the culture in which we live encourages us to do more and more and so we end up going from one thing to another from the time our feet hit the ground in the morning until our head hits the pillow at night. And even in those times when we aren't going from one place to another, when we're just sitting there, we're usually sitting there with the television on or headphones in our ears or scrolling through our phone. In other words there is little time for reflection.

And the cold hard reality is that most folks will not really take much time to reflect on things until they are forced to be still which means either they're injured in some way and so can't get around or, how do I say this, they're dead. And I bring that up this morning, because that's kind of the context in which our scripture passage is found. This is the end of time when Jesus has returned, which means that most people who have lived their lives will have already lived them to their end. And so in this passage Jesus is giving us a heads-up, if you will, about the things that we will look back on and hope that we have done, perhaps in contrast to most of the things we are actually doing. Did you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner? And so the gift of simplicity is that it gives us space to reflect now, rather than later, on how we are answering those questions, so that we can begin making changes if need be.

I was also thinking this about what kind of answer ZPC would give to these questions. The Food Pantry that we have is a pretty remarkable service that is certainly trying to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. We have a hospital team who tries to make sure that those who are in the hospital are not there alone. We have Kairos Ministry which, from what I hear, does a remarkable job of

engaging, loving and giving cookies to, those who are imprisoned. There are other things that ZPC does and then already in these two months I've heard of things that others of you are doing, like setting up orphanages, that make it clear that many have been spending time reflecting now about how we answer those questions.

And while a sermon could certainly reflect long and hard on each of these callings, the one that I really want to focus on this morning is the welcoming of the stranger, or to put it in the language we oftentimes use, hospitality. Now this is something that we have touched on a bit in my short time here. We have talked about the importance of our being willing to engage with those who are here who we do not know well. And I think that oftentimes the reason we think we're doing this is that we want to be seen as being friendly or nice or, and this is perhaps most often the case, so that people will keep coming back. That we welcome the stranger, greet our visitors with open arms and a welcome packet, so that they will return to ZPC. And one of the most important things that we can learn is that hospitality is not about being friendly or nice or so we can convince people to come back. In fact, let me be blunt by saying that to welcome people so that they will come back is good salesmanship, but bad discipleship.

Now you might be thinking, "What's wrong with being nice to folks or hoping they come back?" Nothing. It's great to be nice and it's great to have folks come back. The problem is when we think that this covers hospitality, that we've "welcomed the stranger" and so we can now go back to our friends and go on with our lives. But hospitality runs much deeper than that. In fact I would suggest that when hospitality becomes only about how we get folks to stay here or like us then it becomes not about caring for them and loving them and much more about filling a need or desire that we have, which is of course the exact opposite of being hospitable. So then, what does it mean to be hospitable and why should we be a people who welcome the stranger?

I think it's important for us to see that being hospitable is at the very foundation of who God has been since the beginning of time. If you were to have asked me earlier this week where the first example of hospitality is in the Bible I would have told you the time in Genesis when Abraham and Sarah welcome the three strangers who were journeying by their home. But then I read something this week which pointed out that Creation, the earth and sun, the sea and land, the animals and vegetables which God put on this earth, are an act of hospitality. I had never really thought of it in that way, but how fascinating to see that the first thing God did for us is love us so much that he created a place for us where we could have shelter, food, and drink. That from the very beginning he was thinking of us, creating a safe space for us, being hospitable to us.

And, not surprisingly, this is exactly what we see in Jesus as well. I mean think about the simple fact that he decided to come to earth rather than simply ruling from afar. Hospitality is about more than just having good food for people, but is willing to be present with them. Jesus embodies this for us and sets this remarkable

example. Jesus did not come to earth so that he could then sit around watching a camel race on television or listening to the famous Singin' Samarians, but in order to genuinely be with us. Jesus was not content to allow us to remain strangers, but did whatever he could to be in relationship.

The point is that when Jesus talks to us about welcoming the stranger, about being a people of hospitality, he doesn't do it to simply give us a task, but because it's actually who we are as those who have been made in the image of God. That just as God has welcomed us in his creation and just as Christ came to earth to be with us, so too should welcoming simply a part of who we are, a part of our DNA. There are those who fear that this particular passage in Matthew leads to a salvation of works which says that we do these things for our salvation, but I think that what this passage is not so much getting saved but living as a people who have been saved.

So, if hospitality is about reflecting the image of God, about living into the people who Christ says we now are, if it is about more than just being friendly or nice or trying to get folks to come back to ZPC, then what does this look like? As I was thinking about that question this week I was struck by someone's translation of verse 37. Rather than it being translated, "you welcomed the stranger" it said, "You brought me into your family circle, you took me into your family." "You brought me into your family circle, you took me into your family."

Last month I told the deacons about something that happened during the year I lived in Scotland. I decided to take a trip around the Highlands and the islands and, having a lot more time than money, ended up taking this cheap backpacking trip and staying in hostels. On Sunday morning of my trip I was in a city called Inverness and decided to look for a church to visit. I found one that was about a mile walk and so strapped on my boots and headed to worship. Now a part of the reason I was in Scotland for a year was so that I could visit various churches and so I had pretty much visited a new church every week and knew what to expect. I walked in, I smiled, someone gave me a handshake, I sat down, we worshipped, I shook a couple of hands, I walked out while someone said, "Hope to see you again soon." It was perfect really. I didn't have to talk to anybody or get in any awkward conversations. I could just get in and out.

This time in Inverness started pretty much the same way the rest of them did and at the end of the service I was about to make my way out and find the nearest fish and chips place in Inverness and, well, never see these people again. But before I could get out a guy shook my hand and started talking to me. I gave a few obligatory words, mostly the kinds of things that I thought would give me a quick escape. "Yes, this was great. Wonderful sermon." I'm not from here so I won't be coming back." Those sorts of things. But then, well, he realized I was from America and so immediately he wanted me to meet a member who had spent some time in America. And before you know it I was following this guy this way and that as we wound our way around the building. I kept hoping he wouldn't find the guy so that I could get out and find my chippy.

Unfortunately, he did find the guy. And so we started talking and then I met his wife and two kids and then he said to me, "Hey, why don't you eat lunch with us." I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to be rude and so finally I said, okay" hoping of course that we were going to grab a quick fish and chips and then I could be on my way. But well, they actually took me to their house and an hour passed and then two hours and well, dusk was upon us before we headed back into town and to my hostel.

And I want you to know that when I lay my head on my pillow that night I was in a state of absolute shock. I had never experienced something quite like that when it comes to the church. I have visited hundreds of churches in my lifetime and do you know how many of those churches I have gone to and people have been kind to me? Almost all of them. Do you know how many churches I have gone to and received a handshake and a smile. Almost all of them. Do you know how many of them have said, "We hope to see you again next week? Almost all of them. Do you know how many I have gone to and then that evening laid my head down on the pillow in absolute shock at how they have welcomed me, truly welcomed me. One. And I can honestly tell you that that visit changed me. Why? Because they "brought me into their family circle. They welcomed me." I didn't want them to. I wanted them to leave me alone. But that night as I lay down in my bed, I was so glad they didn't.

The question for us this morning is whether or not we really grasp the depth of what it means to be hospitable, so much so that the stranger in our midst is changed because of it? There are, of course, many ways for us to be hospitable. It can be welcoming folks into your home for a meal, something which I believe is a lost art in our society and something we as Christians should be spearheading. Hospitality can also be a willingness to offer someone a listening ear, to welcome them into your life in their time of need. It can be simply inviting a neighbor to come and sit on your porch with you, perhaps opening up the opportunity to engage in real conversation rather than just being friendly or nice. In thinking about the child who was baptized this morning, hospitality is about taking your vows seriously that you will help raise this child in the way of Christ. Again that means more than just saying hi or smiling when the child says something funny. It means engaging with them, loving them, supporting the parents as much as you can.

This week as the worship team thought about a good hospitality homework assignment we settled on the challenge to "have a conversation with someone you wouldn't normally talk to." What I like about this is that there's great flexibility. You can do this because you've invited someone over for a meal or because you've simplified so that now you have time to have a conversation with someone or with a child because you're taking your vow seriously to care for and love the children in our midst. There are lots of options. The challenge is to do more than just being nice. The challenge, as Jesus makes it clear in Matthew, is to begin seeing people not as stranger, but as Jesus. And as we do, I believe we will not be able to help but welcome them into our lives, into our families, into our congregation. And in so

doing, by welcoming the stranger, they and we will be forever changed. May it be so.
Amen.