



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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You're Welcome

Romans 15:7

This morning we are kicking off a sermon series and church-wide initiative based on Bishop Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. There are a variety of ways for you to participate in this Study. You can come to the Study class that is being held on Wednesday nights at 6 PM. Or you can take part in Mary Ann Hedges Sunday school class. If you like I would be more than happy to order a book for you. The point is: There are several ways to participate. And I hope you will avail yourself of the opportunity to take part in this visioning process.

As a congregation, we are created by God to be the body of Christ in this community and in the world. Because we have been fashioned by an infinitely creative God, we have everything we need to fulfill the mission that God has given us: *to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. In other words*, our churches mission is to help people connect with God, in ways that bring about change in their hearts, in their behaviors, in their relationships, our community, our understanding of ministry, and our world. Thankfully, this transformation isn't entirely dependent upon our sparkling personalities alone ...this transformation flows from a dynamic, life-changing, relationship with Jesus Christ.

I also believe that we are called to participate in the mission and ministry of God's kingdom in our own distinctive way.. We are not the cookie cutter image of any other church. Our church is as unique as the people who come here to worship. We have unique gifts and graces, unique experiences and unique knowledge. Just think of it! God has intentionally brought us all together for a purpose. And I have to believe with all the talent that is here in this church the mission that God has in mind for us to do is no small thing....but the question is: Are we prepared to do it? Are we willing to explore and expand our relationship with God? Are we ready to trust the Lord, to take a risk for Jesus, to accept the exciting challenges of faith filled living or would we rather have things continue as they on always have. Are our hearts so full of the past that we have no room to embrace the future?

I believe, for many reasons, that God is calling us to step out and do something bold with all that talent God has invested in us. We have been called and equipped for transformation, to change not just ourselves but the world. That is why during this season of Lent we are going to engage in a church-wide study, some ecclesiastical self-examination so that we can determine the very nature of God's calling. We are going to ask ourselves: What is God's mission for this church? What did God have in mind when God brought us all together? And as we go through this process we are going to learn a lot about each other and we will also discover how God continues to call and equip us for ministry beyond these walls..

To facilitate the process, in his book, Robert Schnase identifies five characteristics that are consistently practiced in congregations that are vibrant, fruitful, and growing: The five characteristics are: Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development , Risk-Taking Mission & Service and Extravagant Generosity

As we learn more about these practices each week, we will check out how we are doing in each area. We will note places where we can make improvements. We may even make changes as we attempt to live up to the goal of being a fruitful congregation. Today we start with the subject of Radical Hospitality, which is about a whole lot more than passively greeting newcomers at the door. To quote Bishop Schnase, "Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to

invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ". This type of hospitality is no wimpy thing. It challenges us to open our eyes and take a good look at ourselves, maybe even change our attitudes and behaviors in order to accommodate the needs of other talented people who might wish to join us.

A teenage boy entered the sanctuary of a church. It was the church to which his parents and kid brother belonged. In fact, they were there every time the doors opened! They were there too much. As he slumped down in the chair that was as far away from the altar as possible and pulled his ball cap low on his forehead, he dropped his head into his hands and settled in for a nap. He didn't know why he was there. He could sleep more comfortably in his bed. He didn't want to be there. Church was a drag—a religious institution focused on its own survival and uninterested in people like him. Just as he was moving into pre-sleep, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the face of a woman he did not know. *Great*, he thought, *I must be in her personal seat. She can have it! I'm going home.*

But she didn't ask him to move. She simply placed a bag of butterscotch in his hand and said, "I'm so glad you're here this morning. I bought this for you because I heard that you really like butterscotch. I do, too! There aren't many of us around."

He didn't open that bag of butterscotch for a long time. In fact, he hung it on the wall of his bedroom right beside his heavy metal posters, his guitar, and his poems of emptiness and longing. A reminder of grace. A sign of Radical Hospitality.

Years later, just out of his teens, that same young man entered a different church. He was feeling pretty good about being there. He was there because someone he loved asked him to come for a special day. He had awakened early that morning, showered, put on his jeans and a T-shirt, and pulled back his long hair, anchoring it with a ball cap.

As he entered the sanctuary he heard someone speak to him.

"Young man."

He turned and extended his hand in greeting. He was surprised when his hand was ignored.

He was speechless when the person continued. "Young man, you either need to take off your hat or leave the building."

The truth of our own humanity is that each of us has the capacity to be the butterscotch lady or the hat man. We have within us the ability to be kind and compassionate to those for whom the church is a strange and foreign land, even they appear to possess different values than ours. We also have within us the ability to be downright rude..in order to protect what we falsely imagine to be the right and only way of doing things.

During the First Century, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christian Church in Rome. Scholars believe that the book of Romans, the longest of Paul's letters, offers the core of his teachings about what it means to live faithfully and obediently. Some suggest that the letter is his response to the question, How does a sinful person find salvation before a righteous God? Paul takes sixteen chapters to tell us that we receive salvation through a faithful response to God's grace.

Throughout the letter, Paul looks at various aspects of church life through the lens of this fundamental truth: Our salvation is anchored in our faith..but our faith should not just be a private thing between God and ourselves, if our faith is

really faith..and not just pious words...it will be less of a noun than a verb...it will be something active and alive...influencing everything that surrounds it .

In the fifteenth chapter of his letter to the Roman Church, Paul addresses the issue of hospitality, particularly as it relates to the inclusion of those with different backgrounds, stories, beliefs, and practices. He addresses the issues quite simply: *Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).*

What would it mean for our congregation to welcome the stranger in the same way that Christ welcomes us? It means, I believe, that everything we do in the church would let others know that they are welcome in this body of Christ .Of course, it all has to start with us and the impression that we give others about our church. When we are out in public are we happy and excited about our church or do we act like we can hardly stand to slog through another Sunday? Do we spend more time building our church up or tearing it down? Believe it or not, you are a walking billboard for this congregation so your attitude is the first ingredient in hospitality. No one is going to come to this church if they think its the Titanic of worship.

Next, we need to ask ourselves when was the last time we actually invited people to church? Are you one of those people who feel that religion is personal? Are you worried about sticking your nose in your friends private lives? Think about it, most of you are here this morning because someone at some time was brave enough to invite you or your family to experience some aspect of church life in this place. Praise God! Give thanks for the courage and hospitality of that person, and pray that God helps you to be less concerned about the location of your nose and more concerned for your friends spiritual lives. Radical Hospitality requires us to do something...to care about others and to extend the invitation.

And when our invitations are accepted, then we come to the second step...welcoming people. Welcome is seen in much of what we do in our church. Welcome should be exhibited by everyone who comes to this service, not just by the Evangelism Team or by the ushers. Welcome is also what our youth group, children's programs, and Vacation Bible School are all about as well. But the ministry of welcome isn't just confined to the things people do, and it also has something to do with every nook and cranny of this building—as well as in every activity and service project that moves us beyond these walls.

Of course, no one feels welcome if they don't feel included. That is why we say Radical Hospitality is also about inclusion. I would assume that most of us have been in social situations where we felt like a fifth wheel. I'm sad to say that I've visited some worship services and meetings where I was ignored—tolerated at best. These experiences do nothing to inspire our return. Worse than that, they undermine the work of the Holy Spirit. How can we explore faith when the community representing God is so close or so well-organized that there is no room for anyone else?

I appreciate Bishop Schnase's comment that there are times when a church's greatest strength can be an obstacle to radical hospitality. The very things we celebrate—friendship, intimacy, and love for one another—sometimes crowd other people out.

Radical Hospitality also calls us to support others as they explore the possibility of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Recently I was talking with a new mother who used a phrase I had heard before but didn't understand: tummy-time. My children are old enough that they were always put to sleep on their tummies, so I assumed that tummy-time was, somehow, a response to kids sleeping on their backs. When I asked this new mom to explain tummy-time to me, she said, "It is supposed to help them find their heads, to use different muscles, to develop awareness and muscles that aren't developed when they are on their backs."

As persons discover a safe faith community, they need to be supported in their unique faith development. People need safe and open spaces to explore their faith.. Some newcomers will need tummy-time. Others will need to practice back-time. Some will simply need to be held for a bit.

Attitude, Invitation, welcome, inclusion, support.

Becoming a fruitful and growing congregation may require some re-modeling —changing our attitudes, practices, and values.. The point is we need to welcome others as radically as Christ welcomes us. But for now, there is no more profound way to invite, welcome, include and support other people than to share in Holy Communion., for it is to this table that *all* are invited. *All* are fed and nourished in the way of faith.

All are welcomed through the Radical Hospitality of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.