

When you were a child,
perhaps you were part of a large family.
There may have been many people
who needed to use the bathroom,
many mouths to feed, and
never, ever, any private space.

If you were an older child,
there was the expectation to watch
and care for the younger ones.
If you were an only child or a younger child,
you probably had the responsibility
of taking care of the Dog or Cat or Fish.

We all had some sort of responsibility
when we were young and it
almost always was service.
It didn't have to be service in the family, either.
It could have been a paper route.
It could have been cutting grass
or helping out on a farm
or in the family store.

One way or another,
we learned how to do for others.
As we became adults,
our responsibilities changed.
We now had to care for our spouse,
own children, if we had any.
And nowadays with our parents living longer
than ever before many of us now care
for our elderly parents as well.

And as we age our jobs change as well,
but they still always have that feeling of service.
Whatever it was, in some way,
it was a service to others.
Not to mention all the times outside of work
where we had to be hospitable to those around us.... Hospitality....

Some of you grew up where the coffee
was always on the stove and the
door was always unlocked.
You never knew who was going to stop by.
Sometimes it was a neighbor, sometimes a friend.
The door was always open and the lights

were always on to those neighbors, friends,
and family who would stop by.

If you add up all the time we spent at work,
with family, with friends, and having company over;
we have probably spent more of our life
serving others and making others feel welcome than not.

A great example of that was this week
as we as a church opened our arms
to receive in the family and friends of Momma Katy.

Everywhere I looked someone was working
to provide hospitality to our guests.
From Walter and his cleaning crew who offered
to come in a second time this week at no charge
to clean before and after the funeral,
to those who were here early Thursday morning
to those who baked dishes, set tables
and worked tirelessly to provide a meal of comfort to the grieving.
Everyone worked together to welcome our guests.
It is the church at its best.

But we live a long life now-a-days.
It is EASY to become tired of having
to welcome the new person,
welcome the neighbor,
and having a servant's heart.

There comes a time in our life
when we want to be the one served.
Maybe we want to be on the receiving
end of this welcoming business.
We want to be accepted, to be loved.
We want to be first in the minds and hearts of others.
We want Serve-Us instead of service.

A mother invited some people to dinner.
At the table, she turned to her six-year-old daughter
and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?"
"I wouldn't know what to say," the girl replied.
"Just say what you hear Mommy say," the mother answered.
The little girl bowed her head and
with sincerity in her voice said,
"Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

That's exactly where Jesus' disciples were at.
They had been following this Jesus fellow
around for the last few years,
watching him heal the sick and take care of the wounded.

They were there for the feeding of the four thousand
AND the feeding of the FIVE thousand.
You want to talk about having a lot of people
over for company or having lots of family to feed,
try and be hospitable to over NINE thousand people!

Jesus had shown compassion to every one of them.
Even to those who were not of the same race or nationality,
like the Syrophenician woman and
the Gerasene man with the Legion of demons.
He was a whole dinner party in himself.

The disciples were ready for some time
to be the ones served, they wanted some attention,
and they were arguing about who was
to be the first in line to receive it.

It's easy to be cranky,
it's easy to be like the disciples,
wanting things right now.
We find that we demand that people serve us.
Isn't the customer always right?!
We watch as others get the attention that we
so desperately desire for ourselves.
That happens to all of us.

We can get so wrapped in ourselves
but there's hope.
Jesus does NOT tell his disciples they are wrong
for acting the way they do.
He does NOT tell them that they are out of line
for arguing about who is to be first.
No. He tells them that the one who wants
to be first must be last.
The one who wants to be served must serve.

Jesus tells us exactly how to be
the one who is served.
Then Jesus brings a child up to his lap and
says that the one who wants to be first

must also be the person who welcomes the child.
The person who cares for others as compassionately
as they would care for an infant will be the one
who is also cared for with compassion.

Jesus reminds us to welcome
each other as a child.
Maybe that also means to welcome one another as a sibling,
to welcome one another as family.
When we show hospitality to one another,
we not only feel it ourselves,
but we are also hospitable to the Spirit of God.

We have the example of Christ to show us
that when we welcome our neighbor and treat them
with the compassion we would to a child,
we welcome that person,
we welcome the Word of God,
and we welcome the Spirit of God among us.
That is hospitality.

The word hospitality comes from two Greek words.
Philo which means love and xenos which means stranger.
So it is literally love of the stranger.
One writer says that Hospitality is making others feel at home.
Some folks make you feel at home.
Others make you wish you were.

Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare,
and work toward the purpose of helping others
receive what we have received in Christ.
Hospitality is more than common politeness to newcomers,
name tags for greeters, or a few visitor parking spaces,
although these things are important.
Hospitality is a spiritual initiative,
the practice of an active and genuine love,
a graciousness that has nothing to do with self-interest,
an opening of ourselves and our church to receive others.

When the spirit of Christ's hospitality
pervades a congregation, then the choir,
the adult Sunday school classes, the Youth Group,
the children's ministry, the Bible Study Group,
the mission and evangelism teams regularly ask themselves:
"How are we doing at inviting others
and supporting newcomers into our part of the church family?"

And are constantly asking how can we improve?”

Radical means “drastically different from ordinary practice, outside the normal.” Churches that practice radical hospitality are not just friendly and courteous, passively receiving visitors warmly. Instead, they exhibit a restlessness because they realize that so many people do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ! Do we have that restlessness?

How can we make our church more like the radical hospitality we see in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ? Jesus has invited us all to join Him in the Kingdom... He died in order to make that invitation possible. The least we can do is extend the invitation to others that He died to extend to us!

When someone new starts at work or school or someone moves into the neighborhood, in addition to the regular gestures of welcome, let's add: “And if you're looking for a church, I'd be happy to tell you about mine. I love it, and it's meant the world to my family, and we'd love to have you come with us sometime.”

At other times, when we know someone is facing a difficulty in their marriage or is suffering the grief of loss, let's not be afraid to say, “Something that helped me was talking to my pastor. I know he'd be willing to talk to you, too. If you want his name or would like for me to call him, I'd be happy to help and I know he would too.”

These simple invitations should come naturally. We have no problem telling others where we get our hair cut, where we get our car fixed, where we like to eat. So, when it comes to the thing which concerns the most important relationship we have—our relationship to God through Christ's Church—we should never hesitate to speak!

Why not invite them so that they can have the kind of relationship to God that we have?

Think of the people you engage in activities with—
parents of other soccer or football players,
people at work and school. Do they have a church home?

We do this out of a genuine love
for Jesus Christ and for others.
We focus on the people outside of their congregation
with as much gusto as we have for those
who are on the inside, and we use our
utmost creativity, energy, and resources to
welcome the stranger, exceeding all expectations...
no matter what the cost!!!

The words radical and hospitality are not
usually linked together in one sentence.
But in the Christian Church, these two words
should walk hand in hand.
1 Peter 4:9 says Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.

Hospitality streams through Scripture.
In fact it was the main tenant of the Old Testament.
In Deuteronomy, God reminds the people of Israel
to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the wanderer.
Why? “For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Have you ever been a stranger?
Been in a strange place?
A new city, a new airport, a new school, a new church?
What did it feel like. Uncomfortable. Embarrassing. Lost. Lonely.
We too, were once strangers to the faith,
residing outside the kingdom of God.
We too were in the darkness, lost and lonely...
without the hope of Christ.

We now belong to the Body of Christ because
of someone else’s hospitality.
Someone invited us, received us, and helped us feel welcome—
a parent, a spouse, a friend, a pastor, or even a stranger.
By someone’s love, we were grafted onto the Body of Christ.
If we had not felt welcomed and supported in some way,
we would not have stayed.

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.

In Matthew 25:35 Jesus says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me"
And in Matthew 25: 40 says Just as you did it to one
of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."
Would we change our behaviors toward strangers
if we lived as if we really believed this?

Bishop Schnase in his book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations
which I used last week relates in his book
a typical scenario at church that might look like this:

a young mom with her small child stands awkwardly
in the foyer with her child, looking around at all the people
she does not know on her first visit to a church.
An acquaintance at work casually mentioned
how she loved the music at her church and
invited her to visit, but now she is not so sure this is a good idea.

She is wondering about child care,
self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one,
unsure where the bathroom is, too timid to ask directions,
doubting whether this is the right worship service
for her or even the right church.

Where is she to sit, what is it going to feel like to sit alone
with her child and what if her child makes too much noise?
She feels the need for prayer, for some connection to others
and for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job,
the unending bills, her relationship
with her ex-husband and her worries for her child.

Now imagine if we took Jesus' words seriously.
We would look at this woman and the whole bundle
of things she carries and think this is a member of Jesus' family
and Jesus wants us to treat her as we would
treat Jesus himself if he were here.
With that in mind what would be the quality of our welcome,
our efforts to ease her awkwardness?
What would be the enthusiasm to help, serve,
to graciously receive and support and encourage?

It is easy for me to connect with this story
because it is more than some hypothetical example.
Because in it I can see my own daughter Hannah
and her mother as they sought to find a church home after our divorce.
They went some places that they were not welcomed warmly.

At times I was concerned that they would not find the kind of spiritual home they needed.
I was afraid my church universal would let me down.
Taking Jesus seriously changes congregational behavior.

The disciples were just like us.
At every turn they seemed ready to draw boundaries and distinctions that would keep people at a distance from Jesus.
They had a thousand reasons to ignore, avoid and sometimes stop the approach of people reminding Jesus that they were too young, too sick, too sinful, too old, too Roman, too blind or too Gentile to deserve attention.

Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people,
more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers,
more children as long as they are as quite as adults,
more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority.

But Jesus teaches them and us in today's passage a different way. And in Matthew he says the same thing.
Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Or one of the verses of scripture that was used at Momma Kay's funeral from Luke.
Let the little children come to me and do not stop them for it is to such as these the kingdom of God belongs.

In every instance Jesus challenges the disciples and our expectations by overstepping the boundaries to invite people in.
Radical hospitality is seeing people as Jesus see them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings before us.
"People go to the church that is dearest to them and not the church that is nearest to them."

But Schnase also says that Radical Hospitality doesn't stop at a cordial welcome at the church door and during and after service and feeling good about completing our obligation.
Instead Jesus's hospitality expects an unceasing inviting presence that we carry with us into our world of work and leisure and into our neighborhoods and community service.

On June 28 (2005), four Navy SEAL commandos were on a mission in Afghanistan, searching for a notorious al-Qaeda terrorist leader hiding in a Taliban stronghold. As the battle ensued, three of the SEALs were killed, and the fourth, Marcus Luttrell was blasted unconscious by a rocket grenade and blown over a cliff.

Severely injured, he spent the next four days fighting off six al-Qaeda assassins who were sent to finish him, and then crawled for seven miles through the mountains before he was taken in by a Pashtun tribe, who risked everything to protect him from the encircling Taliban killers.

They took Luttrell back to their village, where the law of hospitality, considered “strictly non-negotiable,” took hold. “They were committed to defend me against the Taliban,” Luttrell wrote, “until there was no one left alive.”

Is that how we feel about the guests God brings into our lives?
Are we making sure that every honored guest that is brought into our church, our neighborhood, our workplace, our schools is treated with the highest priority of hospitality?

Are we doing the simple things like introducing ourselves to anyone new we see, wearing name tags so people don't have to guess who we are and even be so bold as to invite somebody new to Sunday lunch?

Do we make sure that at every church event whether its Wed Night Live or a bible study or worship that our guests don't sit alone as strangers in a strange land. I would rather our guests be accosted with hospitality than everyone thinking surely someone must have introduced themselves.

Those are the kinds of things that I am always thinking about.
How would this look from our guests eyes?
What else can I do to make someone feel like this is home?

Hebrews 13:2 says "Do not forget to entertain strangers,
for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."
Radical hospitality is seeing people as Jesus sees them
and seeing Jesus in the people God brings before us.
How are we being faithful to God
for the people God sends to us?
Lord open our eyes. Amen.