

## **Radical Hospitality**

March 1, 2009

To be a Disciple is to follow after Christ, to live in a relationship with him. Jesus spoke of this using the illustration of a vine and the branches. He is the vine, we are the branches. The Vine is the source of our life, our joy, our strength and our hope. If we are cut off from the vine, we wither and dry up. Our focus needs to be on that relationship with him, staying firmly connected to him: then to his life giving spirit will flow in us and through us—and we will produce fruit. We will have productive lives.

The fruit spoken of takes on many different forms. The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians of the Character of Christ produced in us by the Holy Spirit...the closer we live in him, the more we become like him. The fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-control.

Others have detailed other fruit from living in close contact with Christ and the Spirit. Bishop Robert Schnase did a study of what he calls fruitful congregations—churches that have lived in close contact with Christ and touched the lives of others in powerful ways. From this study he gleaned five fruitful practices for congregations and members that exhibit 5 Fruits of God's Spirit at work.

These 5 fruitful practices are for individuals and for congregations...for what God does in us as a congregation, he is also doing in us as individuals. Because we are really a collection of individuals. The Church is the people. Bishop Schnase calls out five fruit of God's Spirit at work in us:

**RADICAL HOSPITALITY**

**PASSIONATE WORSHIP**

**INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT**

## RISK TAKING MISSION AND SERVICE TO OTHERS EXTRAVAGANT GENEROUSITY

These five make up a well rounded life of Christian faith and service, and as a result, a well rounded congregation. We will be taking a journey for the season of Lent...the 40 days prior to Easter...to examine these 5 fruitful practices for our lives individually and collectively. There are devotional guides with daily readings and reflections for each family in the back...please help yourself to one as you leave today...one per family to start. And service will focus on one each week for the next few weeks.

Today we will think for a moment more about hospitality.

*“Welcome one another, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Romans 15:7*

This was one of the key questions asked of Jesus and that He and the religious leaders of the time fought over. Jesus welcomed all kinds of people all the time. He welcomed the little children, after his disciples tried to send them and their mothers away...Jesus doesn't have time for you...But Jesus said unto these is the kingdom of Heaven! Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He ate with former prostitutes and with notorious sinners, and the religious leaders objected...if he only knew how these people were! Jesus knew! He said that the sick need a doctor, not the well. He came to seek and to save sinners, not those who thought themselves righteous! He included those thought unclean, outcasts, gentiles, and women (even women...gasp, the horror!) Jesus made a point of widening the circle of grace and opening up people's understanding of God's inclusive love.

Remember the questions? Who is my neighbor? How many times must I forgive...7x7?

Jesus included Judas in communion, although he knew he would betray him, and restored Peter who denied him three times.

And Jesus called Saul, who persecuted, imprisoned and killed Christians...and empowered him to be the father of the Gentile church that spread all the way to Rome itself.

The table is open to anyone and to everyone who will come. Everyone is invited. But more than that. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, it is as though God himself were entreating through us, begging you through us, be reconciled. As though God were begging you. God, the creator of all, the vastness that is, galaxies unknown to us and distances that boggle our computer's minds, this God begs you to come home, to draw near and be forgiven, to be made whole and to experience his love and grace. It is truly amazing grace.

God truly exercises a radical welcome...and so we must too. We must welcome anyone and everyone.

Yet we in the church have not always done so, have we?

I remember my days as a youth, back in the 70's. we listened to loud music and had long hair and wore weird clothes...yes, us too. Some in the church were offended by us and our style and did not like us in church and made it known.

But is not always that blatant. Sometimes we are just caught up in our own things and we don't see other people. I remember going to a church in Fresno as a Seminary student. I was not greeted when I went in, so I sat quietly in a pew. People began to enter and no one spoke to me. Ok, quiet is good. then a fellow came to my row...and sat on me. He was surprised I was there. I guess I had turned invisible or something. I was thinner than, but I was still 6'3". He did not say sorry...he said, "You're in my seat." I said sorry, got up and moved. Can you guess if I made that church my home while in Fresno?

Being welcoming really begins in the heart. It begins in being open to others, seeing them. Noticing another person and seeing things from their perspective. What must they be feeling, being new? Are they feeling uncomfortable? Nervous? Alone? Sort of afraid?

How can I make them feel welcome? Comfortable? at ease?

This is true in your home as well, on the street, at work or in church. Being a welcoming person is more than Sunday. A gift of hospitality is not just on Sundays in church. How do you treat the stranger or the person who is new to a situation.

Do we engage them? Do we invite them in? do we reach out to them...and let them know that they are welcome?

Did you know that most people would welcome an invitation to go to church with a friend? Now some of your friends have their own churches. But most people in the valley don't go to church...they will tell you they are Baptist or Methodist or something..and what they have told you is the church that they don't go to when they don't go to church. Easter is coming, and most people would welcome a personal invitation to go to church with a friend.

Do we include them? It is not enough to engage newcomers, but do we include them? Do we make room for them and their new ideas? Their new likes and dislikes. Every new group will bring with it a new cultural perspective. Do we expect newcomers to become like us? Do like our kind of food? Our kind of music? Our kind of dress? Our kind of worship? Our kind of giving? Our kind of service? Are we willing to learn from them and incorporate their ideas with ours...or do we expect each new person or group to become like us?

Radical hospitality not only welcomes newcomers, but makes room for them...not as visitors but as members.

Now I must brag for a moment on you. You are one of the most welcoming congregations I know of. We have intentionally made room for all kinds of people. Whether from the street or the boarding house or the board room. Everyone is welcome in our worship. From my first Sunday I was impressed that a university professor might be sitting next to a person who could not tie their own shoes on Sunday morning. I know that many churches would be uncomfortable with this collection of humanity, but I am proud of it, and I think God is too. Are we perfect...far from it. Individually and collectively we make mistakes...but I am proud to be part of such a fellowship as this one and as your pastor I want you to know that when we are able to build a beautiful sanctuary I will strive to be as welcoming to all sorts of people from all kinds of backgrounds as we have always been.

It wouldn't be First Church Downtown if it didn't, would it? regardless of the building it houses, the heart of the church is one of radical hospitality.

As Christ welcomes us to the Table of Grace, we welcome one another! All are welcome at the Table of the Lord, none are rejected. None are too sinful, too dirty, too anything. One need not be a member of this church or any church...the Lord of all begs you to come, come and be made whole. He is waiting to meet you even now, right here. Come to the table of mercy.

The Lord will welcome you there. And we welcome you too.