

“FACING OUTWARD”

John 1:35-51; Romans 15:7

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Recently one of our United Methodist bishops, Robert Schnase, a man with whom I worked on General Conference legislation before he was a bishop, wrote a book that caught my attention and the attention of our staff. It is entitled, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Knowing that God wants all of us to bear fruit and be productive, and curious to see how we measure up to Bob Schnase’s five criteria, we pastors decided to read this book and reflect upon it. So helpful are the five practices Bishop Schnase enumerates, that we decided to set the Lectionary aside for the remaining five weeks of Epiphany and preach a series of sermons on the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. While we are concerned with the health and well-being of this community of faith, we do not want to become overly focused on institutional concerns, so our emphasis will be on the five practices as they relate to faithful discipleship in the world today. What are the **five practices of faithful disciples**? According to Bishop Schnase, they are **radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity**. Are you ready to consider these practices and reflect upon where we are as a congregation and as individuals in their applications to our lives today? I hope so. Fasten your seatbelt! It’s going to be an exciting ride!

There’s probably not a better educational experience for a person learning to be a pastor than to work under supervision as a hospital chaplain. Hospitals are the places these days where people deal with major life crises. We are born in the hospital, we have major surgery in the hospital, we are cared for in the hospital when we are coping with major illnesses, and many people die in hospital rooms. I believe that a pastor is needed at each of these critical moments of life’s journey.

I shall never forget being sent as a new seminarian to visit a young man who had been in a motorcycle accident, and was paralyzed from the neck down. He had just been told that in spite of their best efforts, the doctors could not help him to overcome the paralysis. What do you say to a young man who is permanently paralyzed from the neck down? It was one of the most difficult experiences of my life.

In the book, Schnase talks of his own experience of being called to the emergency room to support an older man whose wife had been brought to the hospital by ambulance. The couple had started their morning with no idea how events would unfold that day. After shopping, they stopped at a restaurant, and while she was eating the woman suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. Shortly after the chaplain arrived, a doctor approached her husband in the consultation room to announce that his wife had died. The doctor handed the chaplain an envelope containing her wedding ring, her necklace and her eyeglasses. Needless to say, the

man was stunned with grief. After a few moments together, the chaplain offered to call the man's pastor. He said he did not have a pastor, because they didn't attend church. The chaplain then asked if he could call a family member to come and take the man home, but he responded that their family was scattered across the country, living many hundreds of miles away. The chaplain asked if he could call a co-worker, and the man replied that he had retired years earlier in another city. What about a neighbor? He responded that he and his wife didn't know the names of any of the other residents in their apartment building since they'd only lived there three years. The chaplain helped the man with the necessary paperwork, offered a prayer, handed him the envelope containing the jewelry and glasses, escorted him to the exit and watched him walk away alone to cope with the shocking news, and to grasp its meaning for his life all on his own.

Life was not meant to be lived that way! In a group-building workshop one time we were asked to list on a piece of paper who we could call at three o'clock in the morning, if we had a major emergency. Although we have no family living close by, a number of names came to my mind, most of them people from this church. Who could you call at three o'clock in the morning? Hopefully, your paper wouldn't be blank. Yet, do you know that over 50% of the people who live on your street do not know the name of a pastor or a Stephen Minister or a friend they could call should they face an unexpected crisis situation. Over half of the people in our community are not affiliated with any church or religious institution whatsoever. Over half are critically lacking in spiritual resources at the times of their greatest need.

I repeat, life was meant to be shared. I believe people need what the church has to offer. People need to know that God loves them, that they are of supreme value, that their lives have significance. People need to know that they do not need to be alone when they face life's difficulties, that they can be surrounded by a community of grace and that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic stress and the temptation to hurt themselves or others. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than an absence of conflict, the hope that sustains them even through their most painful periods of grief, the sense of belonging that blesses them and stretches them and lifts them out of their own preoccupations. People need to know how to offer and accept forgiveness and how to serve and be served. As a school for love, the church is a place where people learn from one another how to love. People need to know that life is not having something to live on, but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself but by giving of oneself. People need a sustaining sense of purpose and hope.

Sometimes I will come home from work so churned up from the business and concerns of the day that I say, "I'm not really hungry tonight." My wife usually says, "You better eat anyway." After sitting down to a good supper, usually when I'm on my second or third helping, I will comment, "I guess I was hungrier than I thought!" I know people who have not been part of a church community who seem to be doing just fine. Then for whatever reason they will come to church and get involved. Frequently I will hear the comment, "I didn't realize what I was missing! I'm so much happier now that I am involved here." Sometimes people don't know how hungry they are for genuine community until they experience it!

How do people find the front door of this church? Well, some come on their own, but a vast majority come because someone invites them. Think about it. How did you get here? Did someone invite you? Did your parents bring you? How did you get involved here? And, what caused you to stick around?

What we are talking about is **Christian hospitality**. “Hospitality” is a familiar word. We all know what hospitality is — or do we? Do we know how to care for strangers so that they will feel a spiritual home here? Do we express genuine love for those who are not as yet part of a faith community? That’s what God is calling us to do. That’s what Jesus instructs us to do, to *“welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed us.”*

Now hospitality is one thing. There are checklists to see how hospitable we are as individuals and as a congregation. But Bishop Schnase says that fruitful congregations practice **radical hospitality**. “Radical” means **dramatically different from the ordinary practice**. Is our hospitality at Church of the Saviour dramatically different from the ordinary practice? Is your personal demeanor as a Christian, one called to be a welcoming, loving person, dramatically different from the person on your street who makes no faith claim and has no commitment to living a life that exemplifies Christian hospitality?

If we go to a great new restaurant, see a good movie or find a helpful website, we do not hesitate to tell our relatives and friends about it. If a co-worker wants to know a good place to eat or to shop, we will gladly share our favorites. If someone new in town is looking for a hair stylist or a place to get his or her car fixed, we have a recommendation. When a co-worker is in the dumps, when a friend is depressed, when a relative is having problems, do we recommend our church, our pastor, the spiritual resources that we have found helpful? Some of us have been part of Sunday school classes, spiritual growth groups, Bible studies, church choirs and other meaningful groups in the church for years. Do we offer these resources to our neighbors, co-workers, relatives and friends in a genuine and loving way? Sometimes people don’t know how hungry they are for genuine community until they experience it. Sometimes people don’t realize what they need until they find it. Will you take the time to be dramatically different from the typical Heights resident and practice **radical hospitality** — going out of your way for someone who needs a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on? After 35 years in pastoral ministry, I am more convinced than ever that people are dying for what the church has to offer.

In spite of the fact that I am 100% convinced that people need what the church has to offer, I would be the first to say that radical hospitality is not easy. Quite the contrary. It is hard work. But there are two reasons why I believe that radical hospitality is absolutely necessary, and why I try to make hospitality a part of who I am as a person, not just part of my job. We do not practice hospitality in order to recruit more members for the church or to increase the congregation’s revenue. We practice hospitality (1) because people need what the church has to offer, and (2) because we are instructed to do it by Christ himself.

If a doctor withholds medical treatment that a person needs, he or she can be sued for malpractice. We do not practice legalism in the United Methodist Church, but are the actions of pastors and lay people any less consequential than those of the medical profession when we fail to share the resources that God has given us, the qualities of Christian community that people are crying for in their daily lives? People need what the church has to offer. And, we were instructed by Jesus himself to show generous love, not just to those we know and feel close to, but to all people. In so doing, we follow the mandate that goes all the way back to Deuteronomy where the Israelites were instructed to *“welcome the stranger in your midst.”*

We have just completed the stewardship campaign for the 2010 budget at Church of the Saviour, and I am happy to report that we reached and, in fact, slightly exceeded the pledge goal. Many people made generous and substantial pledges to undergird the work of the church in the

new year. I am grateful and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But I want to say this morning that the greatest contribution that any of us can make to the church is not our monetary gifts. The greatest contribution that we can make to the church is to invite someone else or to make a newcomer feel genuinely welcome here. Our current economic situation may not be ideal. We may not be able to give the amount that we would like to give. But each of us can invite someone to become part of the community of faith. Each of us can help make someone feel genuinely welcome in this congregation. We never know through whom God will work. Your act of radical hospitality may be the very thing that God uses to change someone's life.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he exclaimed, "***Look, here is the lamb of God.***" One of the men who heard him was Andrew, who went and found his brother Simon, and brought him to Jesus. Simon not only became a disciple, but the leader of the disciples, and eventually the leader of the early church.

We never know through whom God will work. All we know is that we are called to witness to our faith, confident that God will change the culture, one life at a time. Our job is to practice radical hospitality, to be dramatically different from the rest of the world.

A missionary once described evangelism as "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." I think that could be the definition of Christian hospitality as well: one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. May we share with all people that there is help and hope for each of us. May each of us have the courage to **face outward** and practice **radical hospitality**.

Prayer: Help us to hear your call to radical hospitality in our world today. Lord, may we seek to offer help and hope in your name to our relatives, friends, neighbors and co-workers. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.