

OCT. 11 Message

Radical hospitality. Radical means —out of the ordinary,|| —revolutionary,|| even. So what would it mean to receive someone—a stranger—with a presence that was not just polite, but to receive them with revolutionary generosity?

Hospital, hospice, hospitable, hospitality—all from the same root word, meaning generous, caring, sustaining. The most famous of these monasteries was that of St. Benedict. Benedict created a book of rules to live by, called *The Rule of Benedict*, which is used still today by many monasteries. The foundation of the rule is listening. —Listen with the ear of your heart,|| Benedict writes.

And yet the kind of warm-hearted generosity is more difficult in our day and age, more difficult in the city than in the small town. More of us live in places distant from our relatives, places where neighbors come and go, and there is not that continuity of place that gives us the confidence to allow the stranger in.

Another study shows that churches that try to bridge social divisions have a tough job. Paul Lichterman, in his book *Elusive Togetherness*, says that churches that attempt to bridge strong social differences mean well, but are most often not successful. He says when churches in his study tried to do outreach², differences in social customs and in styles of relating made it nearly impossible for faith-based efforts to close the gaps. He said that the single group in his study that did succeed constantly evaluated and reevaluated what they were doing and why they were doing it, in order to understand their own cultural underpinnings and those of others. In other words, they paid close attention to how they were talking, interacting, and engaging on a daily level. They learned to approach others as partners rather than as people they were helping. Success, in other words, lies not so much in ideology or in organizational structure, but in the detailed content of our conversations.

So what does this mean for us as a church? We are committed to being a welcoming community. We say we believe in the —inherent worth and dignity of all.|| And yet we are human beings, and we have the same challenges that all human beings have. We feel more comfortable when we're with people we know. We come to church, we gravitate to people we know. We feel less comfortable when we are with people who have different ideas and interests, different cultural assumptions. Tribalism is strong, and we need look no further than our church.

Let me ask you--have you ever been in a situation in which you felt utterly alone? In a new town or city, where you knew no one?

There are those who come to this city every year, and many who come to this church, who are coming to start a new life—they move here because of some kind of major transition, a new job, the loss of a spouse, or simply the desire to start over in a great city.

But even in gorgeous, livable Silicon Valley, starting over isn't easy. We miss the friends we left behind, our old familiar restaurants, our hairdresser. It takes a long time to rebuild a community of comfort and belonging.

But there is the church—a church—our church, we hope, might be a place where a wayfaring stranger can find respite, acceptance, a new beginning. People don't dress up and come downtown to church on Sunday morning on a whim—people are here because they need to be here.

I hope we would be called a friendly church, a hospitable church, and I think that we are. But do we practice radical hospitality--and if we did, what would that look like? Churches typically offer personal support to their members, but often stop there. A congregation committed to radical hospitality would go beyond seeking out others like themselves, for mutual support—such a congregation would recognize the humanity of anyone who walks into that church.

And such a congregation would concern themselves with people who feel beyond the reach of organized religion. The public theology of such a church would not be limited to charity—which after all, puts the receiver one-down—but would also be committed to justice. Surely this is part of our mission at this church, and our new Buchan Building will allow us to be more open and receptive than ever before, to many different people and different groups who will come here and share this building with us.

So —radical hospitality|| is a term that rolls easily off the tongue--to actually carry it out is a demanding undertaking. But we are not a department store, not a government agency, not an HMO—in all these places, one would expect to be received politely, as it were--served, as is our due. No, we are a church, and it is appropriate that we ask ourselves, what is the moral dimension of our hospitality, the moral dimension of our reception of others, of our solidarity with others, who may not look like us or move from the same assumptions or values? I'm not talking about being politically correct, or legalistic—I'm talking about hospitality as spiritual practice. I'm not talking about just opening the doors—I'm talking about opening the heart.

Yes, bringing diverse people together is difficult—I think we have established that. This is not because people are bad, it's because human beings have a built-in tribalism that needs to be challenged consciously, intentionally. What, then, opens the heart and brings people who are different, together? It is not ideology or theology, nor is it form that brings people together. It's content and it's conversation—it's the universals that all people care about—their children, this good earth, an end to mindless violence, a yearning for peace.

I speak of radical hospitality today because there is a world out there that needs home, that needs community, and I want us to stretch spiritually, to stretch ourselves open. I know that when we take the risk—yes, of course, we'll blunder, we'll make mistakes—believe me, I have blundered more than once--but when we take the risk, our lives will grow so much richer and deeper because we have extended ourselves. Our creativity will

blossom, for we will not be stuck with our old assumptions, our narrow ways of perceiving reality. Our world will grow wider and softer and more trusting.

Let's think about some people who might actually visit our church, and imagine to what extent they might feel welcomed. (And the examples I'm giving are not unlike people who actually have visited our church.)

- a young woman, with an infant in her arms. When the baby starts to whimper during the service, she begins breastfeeding--

- a Native American with long dark hair comes in

- a man from a Pentacostal background waves his hands in the air during the singing of *Spirit of Life*

- a beautifully bedecked woman in a flowered print dress, with matching high heels and purse, she is 6'4" tall, and clearly transgender

- a person who speaks out of turn and can't follow the hymns; he seems to be mentally ill

- a well-dressed couple; the man has an American flag in the lapel of his suit—and they have their Bibles with them

- a homeless man who hasn't bathed in a week

- a woman with a guide dog

- a service man back from Iraq, in uniform, visiting with his aunt and uncle

- a 21-year-old who just graduated from a college back East and moved here to find his first job—he knows no one in town—he is African American.