

“Unstoppable Hospitality” - Message for August 1, 2010
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Celebration Focus on Radical Hospitality in 5 Practices Series
Text: Luke 13:10-19

I'll bet, if you have heard this chapter of scripture read before, that you have not heard these particular verses read together. I want to share a funny seminary word with you: it's *pericope*. It's a word derived from Greek, literally meaning "a cutting-out;" the wikipedia definition is: "a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought, thus forming a short passage suitable for public reading from a text, now usually of sacred scripture." A *lectionary* -- another churchy word you've possibly heard more often -- is a collection of pericopes selected to be read in a sort of schedule according to the Church Year, decided upon by a denominational or ecumenical committee. Many United Methodist congregations follow the Revised Common Lectionary, which was created by representatives of a whole slew of denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Congregationalists, Catholics, Mennonites and others. This was a movement beginning in the 1960s in an effort to bring renewal to worship; the most recent version of this lectionary was created in 1992. There are some good things about the lectionary. It can help to order our church life so that congregations hear a good deal of the Bible over the course of three years (assuming people go to worship every week). It's also a great achievement in unity among various Christian faith communities. In an age when most people attended a church, and people talked openly about their church lives, it was neat for folks to know they were on the same page, that their neighbor had been pondering the same portion of scripture in their experience of worship, as had the people of the next town, or the next state over.

Of course, it's a different world now, and sometimes following the lectionary feels like an archaic practice. Sometimes Michael and I find it helpful and a good discipline for us as preachers, and

other times we depart in an effort to be more responsive to the particular needs and rhythms of our community. One side effect, I've found, of many years of listening to and preaching from the lectionary, is that I tend to make assumptions about the beginning and end of each story, and I sometimes miss linking words that might shed a different light on the context of a scripture passage.

That is the case with this pericope, and the reason for my little background sidebar. Until Michael made the "cutting" this way, I hadn't really noticed the word *therefore* that links Luke's account of healing a bent-over woman with this teaching of Jesus on the mustard seed and the kingdom. These two sets of verses (which are consecutive in the scripture) are part of different pericopes in the lectionary. In fact, the mustard seed passage in the lectionary isn't the Luke version, but the same teaching from Matthew, where it's part of a big collection of parables. Putting them back together the way Luke does it -- embedded in a healing story -- makes me think about the teaching differently.

I've taken a long time to get to this point, but I hope you're still with me. As Luke writes the gospel, it is significant that Jesus heals a woman, in the synagogue on the sabbath, as the illustration of the mustard seed parable, an illustration of what the kingdom of God is like.

Acts of hospitality are often very small things, mustard-seed-sized things -- things like what Jesus offered the woman who'd been bent-over with infirmity for 18 years.

- He saw her.
- He acknowledged her.
- He called her over to be near him.
- He spoke boldly to her, with words of hope, saying, "You are free."
- He touched her.
- We can assume from this action that he prayed for her.

Her response: she was healed. She stood up straight -- *and*

began praising God.

That's an amazing description of the power of radical hospitality.

Now, what made it radical? What made Jesus' actions radical? (Talk to your neighbor for a second -- share your observations out loud. Responses might include:

- She's a woman
- She's infirm -- "untouchable"
- He touched her
- He declared forgiveness and healing
- He did this on the Sabbath)

The text says the leader of the synagogue was unruffled by all this. He starts heckling -- or talking to the crowd. He doesn't point out all these things that were offensive or radical, just focuses on the Sabbath breaking, and he comes out sounding ridiculous, doesn't he? "Don't come to this place of worship to be healed on the Sabbath! Come on the other six days!" Does that strike you as funny?

Okay, let's take it from this angle: as a critique of what is proper behavior for the day of worship and the house of worship. What is "proper?" I wonder that such concerns don't keep us from reaching out to or even acknowledging others, in our worship time, but in the world, too. It's "proper" to be inward focused, quiet and dignified. It's "proper" to ignore the person weeping next to you, to not invade their privacy. It's "proper" to avert your eyes when you see someone suffering or disabled or in pain physically or emotionally. It's "proper" to pretend all is fine in the name of "focusing on God" or "minding your own business."

But what if worship is about allowing God to focus *us*? Allowing God to give us eyes that see others as God sees them? What if worship is about being about God's business? And inviting God to stir up compassion and generosity in us, to push us into response? What if the house of worship becomes the place where we live out kingdom reality, experience life and community

as God meant it, and meant us, to be -- a practice field for living that way more in our day-to-day existence?

In such a context, the presence of the other, especially the stranger, becomes a crucial element of the experience, a key and not a distraction. In such a context, radical hospitality is a non-negotiable practice drawing us into the very presence of God.

Last week Michael talked about a near-drowning experience he remembered from his childhood. I had a similar memorable experience, but with a different ending. No, neither of us drowned! I, too, found that I edged too far out in the pool, and felt that panic as the water went over my head. I remember it was a really crowded public pool where this happened, and as I floundered, my head and hands bobbing above and then under the surface, I kept trying to call out for my mom, who didn't hear my voice over the sounds of all the children there. "Mom (blub)! Ma (blub)!" No one seemed to notice. The next instant, a lifeguard was pulling me up, asking me if I was okay. Overwhelming my relief that someone had noticed was a sense of shame -- embarrassment that I'd had to be saved, and by a stranger, no less.

That memory came to mind as Michael shared his story last week, of how he'd had to push off from the bottom of the pool and, jumping, work his own way over to the side, and his observation that many people among us are drowning, in a sense, and trying to not let anyone see.

It's not an easy thing to struggle openly, for one's weakness to be seen by others. Walking in the door to a church for the first time is one of the bravest acts I can think of. Radical hospitality recognizes how difficult that is, and treats the newcomer with warmth and sensitivity, all the while offering a humble hand up.

While I was away this summer I took in worship at two different communities. While both were stimulating, worshipful and

enriching, and I really wanted to go -- I knew it would be “good for me” spiritually as well as professionally, and a good learning experience -- I want to tell you about why one experience was night-and-day different from the other.

Preparing for the first visit brought up in my face all kinds of unexpected internal barriers. I was beset with anxiety about which street from which to make my approach, where to park (should I really use the parking lot because I don't want to get trapped afterwards?!) the layout of the building and which entrance to use. I was a little anxious, also, about how I would be greeted and what the expectations for “churchgoing behavior” might be, because this was not a Methodist church; how would I answer any questions, and how would they respond in turn? Would I stick out?

I chastised myself a bit, because I thought, “I'm a Christian; I'm a pastor! I can come in! I have some reasonable expectation of what will happen; I've gone to several different worship expressions; I'm just going to meet God, and to learn about a new place. There's nothing to be afraid of.” And I was really humbled by these funny anxieties. I learned from what the first church I visited did well, for I did feel comfortable once I'd taken the first steps. I learned just as much, though, from the internal dialogue that almost talked me out of going when I had no real excuses!

I thought, how much more difficult this must be, how much more courage is required, and how many more of the Enemy's barriers exist for someone who isn't in the regular practice of attending worship anywhere, who is just thinking, “It would be good for me to go to a church.” I would expect that courage would have to be built over weeks and weeks -- or longer -- until it became a desperation for grace, a hunger for God's presence that could overcome those barriers. Not to mention how deep the disappointment would be if the experience turned out not to be a delight and a relief.

My second church visit experience was also to a welcoming church -- totally different style, also a good learning experience. The biggest difference -- the profound, night-and-day contrast in my experience -- was that I went with a friend who attended that church. All those pre-visit jitters, all those questions about the unknown, simply vanished. We rode together and she gave directions. She told me where to park, and led the way to the right entrance, said hello to the greeters, and suggested a place to sit. Even when she left me alone to go talk to someone else, I was settled and peaceful and almost totally at home, ready to encounter God in worship. The power of my friend's hospitality was tremendous. It was healing.

Consider what a huge favor you are doing when you ask a friend, neighbor, coworker or family member to come to church with you. You are helping to dispel all those preliminary anxieties, bolstering the inner voice that's been nagging, "I should really go to a church sometime," giving wings to courage and preparing a heart to receive the healing power of God. In this day and age when people think it's "respectful" and "proper" to leave others alone about matters of religion, we're really allowing them to sink or swim on their own. In such a cultural context, only the most courageous are going to escape drowning.

Even if your friend decides that the worship experience that nurtures your spirit isn't for them, you have helped them take the first steps somewhere. You've let them know that it's not so scary, that they don't have to go it alone. You've opened the door for conversation and opened a door to God.

It's doesn't take that much. Jesus talked about this as a mustard seed; that's really all it is. You plant it, and God grows it. And it will grow so great that amazing creatures can make a home there.

When you come up for communion today, I invite you to take something back with you -- a mustard seed. Put it in your wallet

or your pocket or your purse, or someplace where you'll come across it regularly. Whenever you see it, I want you to think about the people you might invite to journey with God, with you -- to come to worship, or to attend a small group or event, or to pray together. Consider the little acts of hospitality that might make a big difference, and ask God to open doors for you in your conversations and in your actions. Like the power of life that is buried in a seed, hospitality is unstoppable, by the grace of God. It is freeing and healing. It can straighten all that is bent and twisted because it is the power of God, working in you and me. Don't be afraid of it; celebrate it. Share it. Amen.