

“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: #1 Radical Hospitality”

Matthew 25:31-40; **Luke 14:12-14**; Hebrews 13:1-3 ¹

As you probably remember, I’m of the opinion that everything you and I do could be understood either as an effort to achieve “A Life that Matters” or as an effort to secure “Relationships that Last.” And, as you probably also know, the Bible uses a number of metaphors for “A Life that Matters.”

One of the prominent such metaphors in the New Testament is the idea of “maturity.” For example, Paul described his purpose as building up the Body of Christ “*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:13).²

Another primary metaphor for “A Life that Matters” in the New Testament is the idea of “bearing fruit.” John the Baptist preached that our lives should “*produce fruit in keeping with repentance*” (Matthew 3:8); and Jesus said that true followers of His could be recognized by the fruit that their lives produced (Matthew 7:20).

Later, Jesus said that the Father “*cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . . No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. . . . This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples*” (John 15:2, 4-5, 8).³

As I’m sure you know, the idea of “**maturity**” has to do with the development of character qualities in our lives similar to the character of Jesus’ life. Those characteristics include *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*, among many others (Galatians 5:22-23). The idea of “**fruit**” has to do with other people we’ve introduced to Jesus and who have also chosen to follow Him. And this maturity and that fruit are the only things we’re going to take with us into the life to come: our *character*, and *other people* who have been born again through our influence.

These same two metaphors also apply to the Church, the Body of Christ. As you know, and as our Strategic Plan states from the outset, **our marching orders in the Church are the Great Commandment and the Great Commission**.⁴

The Great Commandment has to do with the character of our life together, and the Great Commission has to do with our fruit, that great harvest of souls that is God’s eternal purpose for humankind (Luke 10:2). **Everything we do as a congregation is designed to help us encourage one another to develop greater maturity of character in Christ and to bring others whom we already know into the amazing family of God.** That’s our “fruit.”

Along this line, I’d never heard of “the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” until I saw them on a poster in another church several years ago. I liked them so well that I wrote them down, and I’ve since discovered that Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase has written two books that unpack what these practices look like in real life. The Five Practices are these: (1) **Radical Hospitality**;

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship on May 25, 2014.

² See also Luke 8:14; 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:28; Hebrews 5:14; James 1:4.

³ See also John 15:16; Romans 7:4; Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 1:11; Colossians 1:6, 10.

⁴ Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8

(2) **Passionate** Worship; (3) **Intentional** Faith Development; (4) **Risk-taking** Mission & Service; and (5) **Extravagant** Generosity.

While these “Five Practices” are similar to “the Five Things” that guide our own life together—WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO—the adjectives associated with each practice take the ideas to a different level. So for the next five weeks (with Fathers’ Day inserted in the middle), we’re going to think together about what it might mean to be radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, and extravagant followers of Jesus.

Commenting on these adjectives, Bishop Schnase noted that “These words are dangerous, edgy, and provocative. The practices are basic and fundamental to congregational strength, but the adjectives intensify them toward the unexpected and the exemplary.

“Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations don’t stop at practicing *friendly* hospitality, *helpful* service and mission, or *prudent* generosity. Their practices are extraordinary, exceptional, thorough, and extreme; they are *radical*, *passionate*, *intentional*, *risk-taking*, and *extravagant*. These words draw us in and cause us to ask provocative questions about our own congregational practices. . . . Effective congregations change, improve, learn, and adapt to fulfill their mission, and these words push us to rethink our basic congregational culture, organization, and practice.”⁵

Based on the overwhelming response to his books, Bishop Schnase concluded that “People are searching for a church shaped and sustained by these qualities. . . . The words are contagious, and the congregations that use them behave differently. . . . These words capture the core process by which God uses congregations to make disciples:

- Congregations offer the gracious invitation, welcome, and hospitality of Christ so that people experience a sense of belonging;
- God shapes souls and changes minds through worship, creating a desire to grow closer to Christ;
- God’s Spirit nurtures people and matures faith through learning in community;
- With increased spiritual maturity, people discern God’s call to help others through mission and service; and
- God inspires people to give generously of themselves so that others can receive the grace they have known.”⁶

The point of all this might be summarized by Jesus’ words in John 10:10: “*I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.*” Other translations render this verse as “abundant” or “overflowing” life; and another biblical word that appeals to me as a descriptor for what God wants to do in our lives is the word “flourish.”⁷ God’s purpose for your life, for my life, and for our life together is not simply that we grow, not simply that we be healthy, but that we *flourish*.⁸

This morning, we’re going to look briefly at **Radical Hospitality**, the first of the Five Practices, as it applies to our personal lives and to our life together. We’ll look at our life together first.

⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 9.

⁶ *Congregations*, pp. 7-8.

⁷ See Psalm 92:12, 115:14

⁸ See Psalm 72:7, 92:12-13; Proverbs 12:12, 14:11.

The idea of hospitality and welcome is a central concept in the Bible,⁹ and according to Bishop Schnase, “**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.** It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. . . .

“We, too, were once strangers to the faith, residing outside the community where we now find rich resources of meaning, grace, hope, friendship, and service. We belong to the Body of Christ because of someone’s hospitality.”¹⁰

Imagine this scene: A young single mom stands awkwardly in the foyer with her toddler, looking around at all the people she doesn’t know on her first visit to CBF. An acquaintance at work casually mentioned how she loved the music at her church and invited her to visit, but now the young woman is not so sure this was a good idea. She’s wondering about child care, is self-conscious about the fussiness of her little one, is unsure where the bathroom is, is too timid to ask directions, doubts whether this is the right worship service for her and whether this is even the right church.

She feels the need for prayer, for some connection to others, for something to lift her above the daily grind of her job, the unending bills, the conflicts with her ex-husband, and her worries for her child; but she doesn’t know where she’s going to sit, what it’s going to feel like to sit by herself with her child, or what’s going to happen if her little one makes too much noise.¹¹

Now, imagine how this scene develops as we, the family of God, take Jesus’ words seriously, when He told us that “*whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me*” (Matthew 25:40). If those words were our guide, then all of us, not just the ushers and greeters, would see this young woman and her bundle of hopes and fears, desires and discomforts, and we’d think to ourselves, “She’s a member of Jesus’ family, and Jesus wants us to treat her as we would treat Jesus Himself.”

Can you imagine how we’d try to welcome her and the efforts we’d make to ease her discomfort? Can you imagine the enthusiasm with which we’d all try to help, to serve, to graciously receive and support and encourage? Serious commitment to Radical Hospitality changes the entire congregation’s behavior.¹²

Lauren Winner is a well-known Christian author and professor at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Winner became a follower of Jesus as an adult, and she described her own experience of “standing in the foyer”:

“Few situations make me as uncomfortable as being a newcomer in a church where I know nothing and no one. Everyone else knows when to stand and sit and bow and smile, and everyone else has someone to talk to during coffee hour, and there I stand, awkward and ill at ease, my inner introvert yelling at me to go home and curl up with a novel. . . .

“That was how it was my second Sunday in Charlottesville. I was at Christ Church, where I knew exactly two people. . . . After the service ended, I managed to silence my introvert long

⁹ See Romans 12:13, 16:23; 1 Timothy 5:10; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 1:8.

¹⁰ *Congregations*, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ *Congregations*, p. 13.

¹² *Congregations*, p. 13.

enough to introduce myself to a couple sitting in the pew behind me. ‘Hi,’ they said. ‘So pleased to meet you.’ I complimented the wife’s shoes, the husband asked if I enjoyed the sermon, and then they said, ‘If you don’t have plans for the Fourth of July, please come to our party.’” Lauren went to the party, and before long, she had joined that church.¹³

Inviting a stranger to eat with you is radical hospitality. Someone did that for me once, and I eventually joined their church, too, just like Lauren Winner joined the church of her Fourth of July hosts. Getting new church members is not why we offer Radical Hospitality, but it’s a frequent result, nevertheless.

Commenting on the “radical” adjective, Bishop Schnase noted that “*Radical* means ‘drastically different from ordinary practice, outside the normal,’ and so it provokes practices that exceed expectations, that go the second mile, that take welcoming the stranger to the max. By *radical*, I don’t mean wild-eyed, out of control, or in your face. I mean people offering the absolute utmost of themselves, their creativity, their abilities, and their energy to offer the gracious invitation and reception of Christ to others.”¹⁴

Kindness, hospitality and love are contagious. They’re winsome. And they draw persons to Jesus.

But there’s a personal dimension to these Five Practices as well as a congregational one. Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission & Service, and Extravagant Generosity “are so essential to growth in Christ and to the deepening of the spiritual life that failure to attend to them, develop them, and deepen them . . . limits our capacity to live fruitfully and fully, to settle ourselves completely in God, and to become instruments of God’s transforming grace.

“The adjectives—*radical*, *passionate*, *intentional*, *risk-taking*, and *extravagant*—provoke us out of complacency and remind us that these practices require more than haphazard, infrequent, and mediocre attention. These practices open our hearts—to God, to others, to a life that matters, a life rich with meaning, relationship, and contribution. They help us *flourish*.”¹⁵

Our personal practice of Radical Hospitality begins with a listening, perceiving, accepting, receiving, attitude—a readiness to welcome and to accept God’s initiative toward us. Radical Hospitality on the personal level is sustained by actions that keep us ready to receive God, to welcome Christ, and to make room for grace.

The journey of faith begins in earnest when the God “up there” or “out there,” becomes a living Truth and a personal Love whom we welcome into ourselves. Such welcoming requires us to practice an extraordinary receptivity, a radical hospitality, and a continuing willingness to allow God to come in and dwell within our hearts.¹⁶

The life we all hunger for—a Life that Matters, and Relationships that Last—has its root in the practice of hospitality toward God, of opening ourselves to God, and of making room in our hearts for the flourishing that God’s love makes possible. **God’s love changes everything.**¹⁷

¹³ Lauren Winner, *Mudhouse Sabbath* (Paraclete Press, 2003), pp. 40-43.

¹⁴ *Congregations*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ *Living*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ *Living*, p. 33.

Our personal experience of Radical Hospitality begins with choosing to accept God's love for us as offered through Christ, and then choosing to allow that love make a difference in our lives. Radical Hospitality requires us to answer the critical question, "Will I listen for God, invite God into my heart, and allow God's grace to shape my life, or not?"

Radical Hospitality involves the desire to put ourselves completely into God's hands, allowing ourselves to be transformed into the very likeness of Christ (Romans 12:1-2). When we choose this attitude of acceptance and say *Yes!* to God's grace, we begin a journey down a path that is filled with adventure and ends in Glory.¹⁸

What I hope you're getting from all this is that **before you and I can offer the grace of Radical Hospitality to others, we must first be Radically Hospitable to Grace ourselves.** This is not a decision we make once and for all, but one that we make and re-make all day long, every day, throughout our lives. One of the reasons that we worship together every week is to be reminded to remain hospitable to God's work in our lives. And we'll all do that again . . . right now.

¹⁸ *Living*, p. 36.