

# The Myth of the Welcoming Church

September 1, 2019

[Scripture Focus: Luke 14: 1 - 14]

Let's take a closer look at the Luke text that Ray read earlier. We'll listen for God's Word again. This morning, I'll be reading from the Message...

One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, all the guests had their eyes on him, watching his every move. Right before him there was a man hugely swollen in his joints. So Jesus asked the religion scholars and Pharisees present, "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath? Yes or no?"

They were silent. So he took the man, healed him, and sent him on his way. Then he said, "Is there anyone here who, if a child or animal fell down a well, wouldn't rush to pull him out immediately, not asking whether or not it was the Sabbath?" They were stumped. There was nothing they could say to that.

He went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call you out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place.

The place of honor belongs to this man.' Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

"When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, 'Friend, come up to the front.' That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I'm saying is, If you walk around with your nose in the

air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

Then he turned to the host. "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and will experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."

Today's message is based on God's Word as it comes from the 14th chapter of Luke. Since we just talked last week about healing on the Sabbath, we're going to move past verses 2 - 6 and I'll remind you that Jesus said the every day is a good day to help those in need - even the Sabbath!

I need to confess that today's message is also based on a book that I'm reading that was recommended by my former colleague Lisa Nixon and my friend, Dianne Stockmeier, called "Becoming a Welcoming Church" by Tom Rainer. A section of the book that I especially enjoyed was in the first chapter (which was titled "Are we as welcoming as we think we are?"). The heading said "The Myth of the Welcoming Church." We'll talk more about the myth in a few minutes.

First, I wanted to share with you the "top ten reasons that folks only attend a church one time." Here goes...

(10) Dirty facilities

(9) Church members told us that we were in their seats.

- (8) Boring or bad service
- (7) Insider church language
- (6) Poor signage
- (5) Bad web site
- (4) No place to find info on the church
- (3) Unsafe & unclean children's areas
- (2) Unfriendly church members
- (1) The stand and greet time was unfriendly & awkward

To be fair, I should also share the top ten reasons that people came back to churches after their first visit...

- (10) Guest card was simple to complete
- (9) Church members were not pushy
- (8) There was no stand and greet time
- (7) Guest parking was clear & visible
- (6) Children's area was secure & sanitary
- (5) The kids loved the children's ministry
- (4) There was a clearly-marked visitor's center
- (3) Clear signage
- (2) Members introduced themselves to guest
- (1) A church member asked a guest to sit with them

I'm convinced that every church really is "friendly." Not just the Christian churches but I would think that if you showed up at a temple or a synagogue or any sanctuary, you'd find that folks are "friendly." It seems as natural to me as the expectation that Christian churches are Bible-based. What else would a Christian church find as foundational if it wasn't being Bible-based?

Providence is the third church that I've served. Every single church, where I've been, would describe themselves as "friendly." I've also heard numerous folks comment that

when they walk into the Fellowship Hall (not of this church) following worship, that they've never felt lonelier.

Most of us, congregate with our friends following worship. This makes perfect sense to me! During fellowship time, we usually find our friends, sit down at a table and catch up.

Unfortunately, if you're a guest and you walk in the door of the Fellowship Hall after worship, you'll find folks gravitating to their friends. It's like a first day of school; a first day on the new job; a first time you move into a new neighborhood moment. You walk into an unfamiliar place and see no one that you know and everyone is already talking to someone. It can be pretty lonely... So,

**Do you think that hospitality is a major focus for your church?** I'm not saying that it isn't but I do think it especially easy for us to loose focus on those who God is nudging to come to church.

### **SO WHAT?**

Our instinct is that our churches are friendly and hospitable. After all, for most of us that's a reason that we're a part of a church community.

### **How do we know whether hospitality really is a focus of a church?**

One way is to ask visitors whether they felt welcomed when they came to worship. When I went to Iowa to get to know Loretta's parents before we got married, we went to their Methodist church with them on Sunday. At one point during the service, the pastor, who was a very nice guy, asked all visitors to stand and introduce themselves. I felt like a giant bright light was shining on me. Let the interrogation begin! We would never have come back to that church if we had lived close by.

Another way to gain a sense of whether a church's hospitality ministry is effective is to ask a friend to anonymously visit the church on a Sunday and see what happens. I went to one of our Presbytery's largest (and fastest growing) churches a few months ago. With nearly 1,000 people in worship, I had one person (that I already knew) come up to welcome me. You'd think that someone would have said something to me but no...

My experience with the church was that they were extremely friendly. I had been there many times. I had led a few men's retreats for them. I knew lots of folks there but the congregation seemed focused on themselves. I talked to their pastor a few days later and shared my experience.

I mentioned that I wasn't complaining because I really wasn't church-shopping but if I had been, I would have considered their hospitality inadequate. I saw their pastor a few weeks later and was assured that they agreed that their focus on hospitality had gone from "heightened" to "non-existent." While they would never have imagined that folks were not feeling welcomed when they came to visit, minimal self-examination resulted in them admitting that they had lapsed into a place where hospitality wasn't really that much of a focus.

They were a large and growing church. They didn't feel the immediate need to pay attention to guests. Great news that they were large (and getting larger) but bad news that they had lost their focus on paying attention to those who God was nudging to come to church.

## NOW WHAT?

So, what can we do to improve our hospitality ministry? To me, the first step is to determine whether there's a need to refocus on hospitality. Some of us will be ok to push back from the table and take an objective look at things; others may need outside intervention (asking a friend to drop in for a test).

No matter what's going on we have to remember that God is encouraging us to be hospitable (not just in today's scripture) but in the 13th chapter of Hebrews where we're told "Don't neglect to show hospitality..." and 1 Peter 4 where we hear that we are to "be hospitable to one another without complaining."

If a church's hospitality ministry isn't operating at 110% efficiency, maybe the church should begin asking God to help develop a plan that will improve their hospitality.

I know, every church thinks that they're friendly but maybe having folks who are gifted with welcoming spirits, focused on particular sections of the church could be a step in the right direction.

There are times when organic ministry is a good thing; maybe even the best thing! When I see a longtime member of this community of faith make a blanket for a new baby whose parents have only been at the church for a relatively short time, I'm a proud and happy camper. I don't think that we can organize or legislate that kind of hospitality. Sometimes, wonderful people just come pre-wired from the factory that way.

However, I do believe that identifying an especially welcoming person to look for new folks is also a good idea. When God nudges someone into His church, seems that we have a responsibility to be hospitable. I don't think that this is an either/or proposition.

A few minutes ago, we heard Jesus' words about invitation (especially to the table). There could never be a better example of this invitation than Christ's invitation to the Lord's table...