

Practice Radical Hospitality
A Sermon on John 10:22-30 by the Rev. Philip Major
Part Three of a Five Part Series
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What are the boundaries for our community? Which people belong in the flock? What sort of a welcome do we give to those who step into our community?

The Gospel of John is especially concerned with boundaries. Today we read: *The authorities of the Temple gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."*

One of the primary questions for the first several generations of disciples was, "which people belong in the flock of Jesus' disciples?" Peter and some of the other disciples thought that their people, that is the Jews, were the ones who belonged in the flock of Jesus' disciples. Paul came along with the idea that a new group of people, the gentiles, would be grafted into the flock of Israel through Christ Jesus. According to Paul, the flock includes gentiles and Jews, women and men, slaves and freeborn citizens, in other words, the flock includes everyone. In a similar way, Luke places the idea that God's salvation is intended for all in the center of his Gospel.

John's congregation had a different experience. The experience of John's congregation was traumatic. There are very few things we can tell for sure about the first congregations of Christians. One thing we can tell for sure about John's congregation is that they were Jews who were thrown out of their own synagogue. We can tell John's people were thrown out of their synagogue because John created a new Greek word to describe their experience: *asynagogos*, which means 'to be put out of the synagogue'.

John's people were thrown out of their synagogue. John responded in kind, as people sometimes do, by fighting fire with fire. The leaders of the synagogue created strict boundaries, and pushed John and the other Christ followers out. John responded by creating strict boundaries for the new congregation of Christ followers; some people would be inside the flock and others would be outside the flock.

So in the different books of the New Testament we see several different ideas about the boundaries for the flock of Jesus' disciples. The question for us is, 'which of these ideas about boundaries will we choose for our community?'

I'm going to make an educated guess about the way you will answer this question. I'm going to guess that if the members of St. Paul's were to create a creed for this church, one of the statements would be something like, "All people are welcome." Was I right about that? We derive this idea from St. Paul himself, the person who said these words, *there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*.

We do not exclude people from membership, or from the sacraments, or from leadership in the church for any reason. We welcome women and men. We welcome the rich and the poor. We welcome those who identify as gay or straight. We welcome those who are celibate, those who are married and those who are divorced. We welcome those who are illiterate and those who are highly educated. We welcome people who have lived in America for generations and those who are Americans by choice.

We try to practice radical hospitality. This is a lesson we are learning from Jesus.

I am devoting my sermons during this Easter season to five fundamental practices of discipleship. Today's sermon is about the third practice. Jesus' disciples practice radical hospitality.

The first practice, from the story of Jesus and Thomas, is to build relationships of trust. The second practice, from the story of Jesus and Simon Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, is to feed the flock. The third fundamental idea for Jesus' disciples is to practice radical hospitality.

Let's take a few minutes to explore this idea. What does it mean to offer hospitality? My dictionary defines hospitality as *the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill*. Our hospitality is not primarily concerned with the people who are already comfortably situated in St. Paul's particular flock. We might describe the normal social interactions between our members as fellowship. According to the dictionary, hospitality is different. Hospitality is specifically concerned with people who are visitors or strangers. So we are always asking ourselves, "what do these visitors or strangers need and want?"

I admit I have sometimes responded to visitors and strangers to the church with something that looked like hospitality, but it was actually more like recruitment. I used to be the choir director of the church. Our church building was quite small. I could hear the people singing in the front pew and in the back pew of the nave. If I heard

a new attender singing with a clear strong voice in the congregation I might approach them with a smile. But I might not offer them hospitality. Instead I might engage in conversation that was more like recruitment. I was addressing my needs, which was usually to recruit one more tenor for the tenor section, or one more alto who was good at reading music.

So there is a difference between hospitality and recruiting more people for your team. Hospitality is the act of welcoming strangers and visitors with the question in mind, “what does this person need and want?” Sometimes we think we know what visitors need and want. Sometimes we think visitors and strangers need and want the same kinds of things we need and want. Often we are wrong.

This visitor might not have any need to attend choir rehearsal each Thursday evening. This stranger might not want to join the finance committee. This young mother or father might not need to become a Sunday School teacher. That might not be the reason they have walked through the doors of our church for the first time. This visitor might not need a new group of friends. This visitor might not need to begin to spend two or three hours each week doing volunteer work at the church, the way we do. This stranger might not want to go to coffee hour. Hospitality is the act of welcoming visitors and strangers with the question in mind, “what does this person need or want?”

In my experience, the one thing almost all visitors want is to be in the presence of God who loves them, in the presence of God who creates them, in the presence of God who sustains them. One of the reasons why some people do not belong to a church today is that the people who already belong to the church make it difficult for other people to just be in the presence of God.

Hospitality was a fundamental idea for Jesus. In most cases, Jesus was not attempting to recruit people. In most cases, Jesus asked, “what is it that this person needs or wants?” Jesus was the model of radical hospitality, because Jesus extended hospitality to people who were not part of his group. Jesus extended hospitality to Samaritans, to tax collectors, and even to women. Jesus extended hospitality to Nicodemus, the pharisee who was so skeptical, but who kept coming to Jesus when no one else was around. Jesus extended hospitality to the thief who was hanging, dying, on the cross next to him. That was radical hospitality.

The disciples and other people constantly questioned and challenged him. They didn’t think it was right for him to spend his time with the children. They were disturbed by the way he treated women as equals. But on this issue, Jesus was relentless. In Jesus mind, all people were to be welcomed as members of God’s flock.

Jesus extended hospitality to little children and to their mothers. The disciples discouraged them. The disciples, who in this case were all men, thought they knew what was right for the children and their mothers. Jesus was relentless. Jesus said, you cannot make this decision for these mothers and their children. Jesus asked, “what is it that these mothers and children want and need?”

Consider just one more example of Jesus’ radical hospitality. When the woman who was a stranger to the disciples, poured an enormous jar of expensive, perfumed oil all over Jesus’ head and body the disciples were very upset. They protested, “This is wrong. This oil could have been sold and the money be used for something really valuable.” Jesus disagreed. Jesus said, “This woman has the right to make her own choice about what she will do with the things that belong to her.” This was a radical message. Jesus said to the twelve, who were all men, “She is a stranger. She is a woman. That doesn’t mean you know what is best for her.” Jesus was the most beautiful, powerful example of radical hospitality.

Of all of the New Testament writers, St. Paul may have understood this best. In his most mature letter, the letter to the Romans, Paul’s thesis is, “Just as God has accommodated Godself to humanity in the person of Christ Jesus, so you too must accommodate yourselves to one another.” Gentiles and Jews, men and women, learn what is most important to the other person and accommodate yourself to that person.

So this is the third practice for Jesus’ disciples; we try to practice radical hospitality, the same way Jesus did. We practice radical hospitality because sometimes we are not very good at it. Sometimes we forget to follow Jesus’ example of extending hospitality to those who are very different from us. Sometimes we forget that hospitality is done for people who are not already members of the flock. Sometimes we are self-centered when we meet visitors and strangers. Sometimes we forget to ask, “what does this person really want?” Sometimes we forget to listen.

We practice radical hospitality because that is what we have received from God. God has given us generous gifts; so we seek to be generous to others. God has received us with love; so we try to receive others by paying attention to what they need. God has welcomed us into this bless family of God’s people; so we seek to welcome all people as equal members of this flock.