

Extending the Invitation

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October 9, 2011
Radical Hospitality: To All

Isaiah 54:8-9
Luke 14:15-24

I recently read a story about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. I don't know whether it actually happened, but it was a Wesley kind of thing to do. In Wesley's time the churches in England were mainly for the rich. You had to wear fine clothes and be neat and clean to attend church in the 1700's. To make sure that the poor could not ruin their fine places of worship, the story goes, churches were built up high in a rectangle without any steps to enter them. You could only get into them from a carriage. It is said that John Wesley had steps put in his churches so the poor could enter to worship God.

An apocryphal story? Maybe. Many English churches had no steps even before Wesley. But they had other sorts of barriers—class and cultural chief among them—that helped some feel welcome and others distinctly not.

It was this “not” group that Wesley and his Methodists welcomed so warmly into their movement, people who did not have the gospel preached to them, who had never heard the good news that God loved them as much as God loved the lord and lady of the manor. It was these folks who Wesley invited to feast on the goodness of God as much as anyone else.

“When you give a dinner, do not invite your friends or your relatives, in case they may invite you in return,” Jesus told those who had gathered at a Pharisee's house one day for a Sabbath meal. “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.” Jesus had a special place in his heart for the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

He went on to tell a parable about a banquet to which the host invited many prominent people. When everything was ready, the excuses started rolling in: “I have to work late...my kids have a soccer game...we have to go out of town.” Since those first invited wouldn't come, the host sent out an invitation to some who would, people who had little land, no jobs, not much family, and they had no problem accepting the invitation.

Maybe that's why the Methodists moved out of those buildings and into the streets. It wasn't just enough to build accessible places of worship. You had to let people know that were welcome to enter them. You needed to extend the invitation to God's children wherever they were. So Wesley and his compatriots left the comfortable surroundings

of university and church to preach to people in the fields and roads where they lived.

This sort of outreaching ministry did not come naturally to the highly-educated, proper Oxford don. But he knew where God wanted him to be. One of my favorite lines from Wesley's journal sums up his feelings on the matter. "It is no marvel that the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I; I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?"

"I love a commodious room..." But field preaching saves lives.

That's what you call radical hospitality in action. Not waiting for the masses to come to you but instead going out to them. The first Methodists practiced their hospitality in so radical and inclusive a way that many church leaders at the time found their activities to be offensive. Wesley was banned from preaching at many Anglican churches, even though he was an ordained priest in the Church of England.

Extending God's invitation to those who need it is no easier for us than it was for Wesley. We all know how hard it is to talk about religion in public or even to admit that we go to church. But as we conclude our series on Radical Hospitality today, it's important to think about the sort of welcome we are asked to offer.

Christian author Max Lucado talks about what a difference it can make when you do, though. One summer while Max was in high school he worked laying pipe in a West Texas oil field. At lunch time the workers in the oil field would play cards and tell jokes. "For thirty minutes in the heat of the day," Max says, "the oil patch became Las Vegas, replete with foul language, dirty stories, blackjack, and barstools that doubled as lunch pails."

One day during lunch a supervisor walked toward the workers. Did he have a job for them that couldn't wait?

Not exactly. "Uh, fellas," he said.

The workers turned and looked up at him. "I, uh, I just wanted, uh, to invite..." The workers could tell he was uncomfortable with whatever he was trying to tell them. "I just wanted to tell you," he tried again, "that our church is having a service tonight and..."

"What?" Max thought to himself in disbelief. "He's talking church? Out here? With us?"

“I wanted to invite any of you to come along,” the supervisor finally blurted out.

There was a dead silence among the workers. Several stared at the dirt. Others just looked at each other. No one said anything.

“Well, that’s it,” he said. “If any of you want to go...let me know.” Then he left. When he was out of ear-shot, Max and the other workers broke out laughing.

Five years later Max was a college sophomore struggling with a decision. He had drifted from his faith and he wanted to get back in touch with God. But the price was too high: His friends might laugh. That’s when he thought of the supervisor in the oil field. The supervisor whose love for God---and for his workers---had been greater than his concern for his own reputation. “So I came home,” says Max. And he’s been at home in the Christian community ever since.

The radical hospitality of God is meant for all people. Sometimes that will be a reach, to be sure. It will take us out of our comfort zone. But it won’t always mean telling people about our faith or inviting them to church. Some of us may leave our comfort zone two weeks from now to join the work team heading to the Catskills to help clean up and repair churches and homes damaged by the recent floods in that area. Some us might push ourselves past our shyness to make visitors here feel as welcome as we can, thinking of every way our church might become more accessible to rich and poor alike. Some of us might issue an invitation to an upcoming church event to someone we think would enjoy it. And some of us may get truly radical and try to figure out ways to extend our hospitality into the community so more people can sense what a warm and welcoming place this is.

Why should we do this? Why should we leave our familiar surroundings to enter a newer, less comfortable space? For one good reason that I can think of: People need it. People need to know that their life is of supreme value. People need to know that they are not alone to face life’s challenge. People need to know that they do not have to figure out entirely for themselves how to cope with family tensions, self-doubts, periods of despair, economic uncertainty, sickness and loss. People need to know the peace that runs deeper than the presence of conflict, the hope that endures through times of trial, the joy that comes even in pain. People need to know that life is much more than their next purchase or vacation or the outcome of a game, but that they can find an enduring sense of purpose that will sustain them through all that life brings them.

To put it simply: people need to know the love of God for themselves. They need the support of a community of grace and forgiveness. They need what this church has.

So, modern-day Methodist, what will you do to get this word out? How will you extend the invitation of God for those who need to hear it?

I’m not asking you to become one of those obnoxious people who is always pushing

their faith on others. But we all can look for occasions to sensitively share what our faith or our church means to us. We can all be on the ready---given the right time and circumstances—to engage with someone who is on a spiritual journey or who needs a little more love in their life. These will usually come up in unplanned times and situations, but they will arise more often than we think.

We may never know the heart we touch, the life we change, yes, even the soul we save. But wouldn't that be a wonderful way to do something for the God who has done so much for us?