

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
May 17, 2015

Series: 5 Fruitful Practices for a Well Balanced Life
Sermon: Radical Hospitality

Romans 15:7 (MSG)

So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now *you* do it!

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew.

Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

Sermon

A while back, I was going through the Wal-mart aisles. I was looking for soap for our bathtub and it was amazing at the number of options that one can get. From every different scent to every different need, there is a soap out there that can take care of your bathing requirements. On a lower shelf, I found a white bottle, very plain looking, and it said in black letters, strawberry scented Bubbling Milk Bath.” And below that, in smaller letters, were the words, “No Frills.” How can strawberry bubbling milk bath be no frills? If it’s anything, it’s a frill. That’s why you buy it! Because it’s a frill! What can be more inviting than a hot bubble bath? How many times have we had a bubble bath and we said to ourselves, “I’ll have one, but I won’t enjoy it!” To be honest, I haven’t had one in years, but it is something special. It sounds inviting.

This morning, I want to talk to you about the art of hospitality. Making people feel at home. Making people feel like they are loved and cherished. Hospitality. Similar words use the same Latin root. Hospital literally means care for a guest. Host is someone who runs the hospitality. Hostels, common in Europe, are places where travelers can find refuge. We measure hospitality in many places that we visit every week. When we go to the restaurant, we judge how well we have been received. All of us have those wonderful stories of excellent service. All of us have those stories when the service was not that good. Have you ever been to a restaurant, been seated, and no one come to get your order? It’s as if you’re sitting out there in la-la land. Steph and I turned it into a game. How long until someone notices. If it’s more than a half-hour, we generally get a free meal out of the deal. You want to feel welcome. You want to feel like you are cared for. But those of us in the church sometimes forget, pastor included, that all of us are to be the hosts, not just those sitting in our seats. We might have a visitor who comes and are seated by our ushers and they sit and who knows if someone is going to say Hello! I love our church, because it is a warm and friendly congregation, but every church could use a reminder that there are people out there looking to see if they can fit in somewhere in the mix. There was a church newsletter that mentioned a man who visited eighteen different churches on successive Sundays. He was trying to find out what the churches were really like. He said, “I sat near the front. After the service, I walked slowly to the rear, then returned to the front and went back to the foyer using another aisle. I smiled and was neatly dressed. I asked one person to direct me to a specific place: a fellowship hall, pastor’s study, etc. I remained for coffee if served. I used a scale to rate the reception I received. I awarded points on the following basis: 10 points for a smile from a worshiper. 10 for a greeting from someone sitting nearby. 100 for an exchange of names. 200 for an invitation to have coffee. 200 for an invitation to return. 1000 for an introduction to another worshiper. And 2000 for an invitation to meet the pastor. On this scale, the man said, 11 out of 18 churches earned fewer than 100 points. Five actually received less than 20. The conclusion. The doctrine may be biblical, the singing and music inspirational, the sermon uplifting, but when a visitor (or member) finds nobody cares whether he’s here, he is not likely to come back. How good are you at making people feel welcome? The nature of the church is this: We have the best news on the planet, God cares for us. He gave us his Son. I don’t know about you, but when I have good news, I gotta share it. I greet people I don’t even know! Are you a hospitable person? Do you care for those around you? This is what I want you to do. When you’re out and about, find out the name of the people who you come into contact with. Most employees in the service industry have nametags. Call them by name. Find out how your waiter or waitress is really doing. When your at the cash register wherever, tell the clerk, by name, that you appreciate their efforts. The last time I went to Omaha two years back, I went through a Wendy’s drive through. In the short 20 seconds that I talked with the guy at the window, I was really impressed by his friendliness and his sincerity. Granted, his job was to hand out beef in a bag and take the cash - but I felt like he cared! I went in to talk to the manager. True story. I told the manager that I was from out of town, but I was impressed by the window guy. She smiled and said softly, he can’t do anything else. He can’t figure out a mop, he can’t cook, he has no skills that you would associate with running a burger joint, but they keep him at Wendy’s because of his drive-thru attitude. People keep coming back and he knows their names and the cars they drive. She whispered, He’s dumb as rocks, but he makes more than anyone else in that kitchen. Romans 12 says Practice Hospitality. It takes practice. It takes years to learn how to honestly care for each other. Wherever you go, be hospitable. I was at the Department of

Motor Vehicles a while back. Had to licence the car. Took my number and waited. 60 minutes later, the lady called my number. I went up and she did not look happy. She didn't look mean, but she just had that look of sadness. I asked if everything was OK. And she said, "Just don't yell at me." We chatted for a little while. Apparently two people had been in the previous hour and had ripped her apart for things that were not her fault. You've been down there, the front ladies have nothing to do with how the bureaucracy works. I put my hand over one of hers and said, "Thank you for the job that you do." She finally smiled, and said, "Thanks." Practice hospitality. Make a difference in someone's day, in someone's week. In someone's lifetime.

It is my hope that this church can be a place where we practice hospitality. We might not have the largest sanctuary, the largest staff, the best location or the nicest parking lot. But what we do have is a place that you can call home, a place where people are glad to see you, and a place where you can grow spiritually and find discipleship not only talked about, but practiced. God bless ____ who read all of those names in the second scripture lesson. This is the closing of the Book of Romans. Paul ended his longest letter with recommendations. He gives this long list of people who were either new to the church in Rome or on their way to Rome. These aren't people who belong to the church in Rome. Paul hadn't even been to Rome yet. But Paul asks them to greet these people. He even gives them a little background information about them. Greet them. By greeting, he doesn't mean walking up to them and shaking their hands and saying, "Hello!" Nope. He means get to know these people. Help them out. Become a part of their lives. They are joining the fellowship. Fellowship doesn't just mean being friends, but watching each other's backs. Sharing the journey. Fellow pilgrims on the same path.

One of my favorite Bible verses, somewhere in the top 5, is out of Hebrews, chapter 12. It says this: Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for by doing such, some have entertained angels unawares.

This morning I want to close with a short story from Schnase's book.

"When I worked in a clergy-training program at a hospital, I was called to the emergency room to support an older man whose wife had been brought to the hospital by ambulance. They had started their morning with no idea how events would unfold that day. After shopping, they stopped at a restaurant, and while she was eating, she suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. Shortly after I arrived in the small consultation room with the husband, a doctor approached him to announce that his wife had died. The doctor handed me an envelope that contained her wedding ring, her necklace, and her eyeglasses to give to him. Needless to say, the man was stunned with grief. After a few minutes together, I offered to call his pastor. He did not have a pastor because they attended no church. I asked if I could call a family member to come take him home, and he told me his family was scattered across the country, living many hundreds of miles away. I asked if I could call a co-worker to be with him, and he told me he had retired years before from work in another city. What about a neighbor I could call? He told me that he and his wife didn't know the names of the other residents in the apartment since they'd only lived there three years. I helped him with the paper work, offered a prayer as I held his hands in mine, handed him the envelope that contained the jewelry and glasses, escorted him to the exit, and watched him walk away alone to cope with the shocking news of the day and to grasp its meaning for himself all on his own.

Life is not meant to be that way. God intends for people to live their lives interlaced by the grace of God with others, to know the gift and task of community from birth to death, to have the interpretive structures of faith to sustain them through times of joy and periods of desperate agony, to have the perspective of eternity, and to, as I Timothy says, "to take hold of the life that really is life."

People of OCUMC: Be not forgetful to entertain strangers - there are angels in your midst. They may be flesh and blood, but angels nonetheless. Let us be radical in our care for each other. And the people of God said, AMEN.