

Calvary United Methodist Church
March 17, 2019

RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

Luke 7:36-50

I'll ask the kids to come forward. And good morning. How are you doing?

Today everybody is Irish and the Irish gave so much back to the world and it's a very lovely place and if you ever get a chance to visit the country it is a great country. I have relatives who are from Ireland and today you can be very Irish. You might have some Irish in you, I don't know. But it's St. Patrick's Day.

Now, do you know much about St. Patrick? Good, because if you did, I'd have to ask you to be seated so I could tell you all about him. When St. Patrick was just a kid he lived up on the coast between England and Scotland. These raiders came from Ireland, these crazy half-barbarian guys came in and they captured him and they took him and a bunch of other kids as slaves. That wouldn't be very nice, would it? And they took him to Ireland and they put him on a farm where he had to watch sheep. He didn't get much to eat. He was sometimes beaten. It wasn't really very nice. And he was probably about somewhere between 12 and 14 when it happened and he spent 6 years as a slave. And then he got the chance to escape. Now, that was dangerous because if you got caught they might kill you. So he escaped and he went back to his family on the coast there of England and they were so happy to see him. You would think he would just want to stay there, right? But he felt God calling in his heart and he felt a compassion for these crazy Irish people who were knocking on wood because that's how they talked to the spirits in the trees and they thought the spirits in the trees wouldn't like them so they had to knock on wood. That's why people do that. And they had all these crazy superstitions and basically it was all bad luck. So, St. Patrick felt God calling him to go into ministry, so he studied for the ministry and you know where he went? Back to those crazy Irish. And would you go to someone who was really mean to you and try to love them? You wouldn't do that? That's what he did. It's actually what God asks us to do all the time. So, he went there and he began to preach that God loves people. He began to show them that God loves people. He was a little bit daring. They worshipped trees. He said: there's no spirits in the trees... give me an ax. So he cut down this pine tree. They said: oh, no! Fire from heaven will fall. He said: that's a bunch of stuff. And nothing happened. And he led people in this amazing way to come to know the real and true God and Jesus, his son.

Now, he used whatever was at hand because it was a poor country, but if you go to Ireland you look at and you can see more shades of green than you can count. It is the greenest place I've ever seen and I just can't describe the shades of green. They are just glorious. But shamrocks abound. Do you know what a shamrock looks like? It looks like a clover in a way. It is in the clover family. And he said: this will teach us about God that God is everywhere because there

are three leaves on a shamrock and he said it stands for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who is everywhere all around you. And in the 40 years that he worked in Ireland he changed the whole country.

Now, later on when you are a more advanced reader, there is a wonderful book by Thomas Cahill called "How the Irish Saved Civilization." I bet somebody out there has read that. Anyone read "How the Irish Saved Civilization"? Man, you got to get up on your reading game. It's a great book. Thomas Cahill. It's a great book.

Well, St. Patrick then became really important to us because he showed us how to love even our enemies. So, today everybody is Irish. And I have a button for you that you can wear proudly. One says: the Luck of the Irish; one says: Kiss me, I'm Irish; one says: Happy St. Patrick's Day. You want the Kiss me, I'm Irish? A lot of people will kiss you. There you go. Which one would you like, girls? Here's a Kiss me I'm Irish, Happy St. Patrick's Day, a horseshoe. You want the kiss me one? No. You might get a lot of people to kiss you. There you go. Okay.

Let's take a minute for a word of prayer: Lord, thank you for individuals like St. Patrick who was just a kid and went through so much and then found your love and grace. Help us to do the same. And the way he changed the world: maybe we could change a little part of ours. Amen.

Oh, I also have fruit snacks. Would you like a fruit snack? Okay.

Message:

Would you join with me in a word of prayer? Gracious Lord, help us to hear from you today. I pray that you would guide our hearts and minds to know what it means to follow you in this world of such pain and such violence and such misunderstanding. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, it is certainly true that in the world and in the church there are many troubles. We see them every day and some people just don't want to face them. They are unwilling. They turn their head. Some look for opportunities, for ways to overcome, to thrive in the midst of difficult times. There is no doubt that the church in the United States is facing very troubled times, but look, the Church of Jesus is not corporation. It is not a business. It is not even a service organization. It is the living body of Christ. It is the vanguard of the Kingdom of God and the movement by the Spirit of God for the transformation of the world. That's why we are here. We cannot use old wineskins, however, to contain the new wine of the Spirit. Nor can we be the church that we were in an earlier day. This is a brand new day with brand new challenges; we must become the church of this day in the future if we are going to remain a vital part of the Body of Christ.

Look, churches are shrinking all over the place. There are nine of them taking a vote today whether they can merge in Harrisburg, whether they have the ability to do that. They need our prayers. And people are closing the doors of churches all over because they forgot they were a living part of the resurrected Body of Christ. So to have a future we have to remember who we are.

Over the next five Lenten Sundays Pastor Jeff and I will be addressing this and how to build bridges into the future and we begin today with what I think is one of the most important ones and that is the radical hospitality of Jesus and his invitation to us to live with that kind of hospitality to all people, to all of God's children.

Now, the Gospel story is one of those about hospitality. It is set early in Jesus' ministry at the house of a Pharisee named Simon. Pharisees were not terrible, bad people. They get a bad rap, but they really weren't. These are people who took upon themselves the goal of observing the law because they felt if they observed the law fully not only could they be blameless but God would come and rescue Israel, that God would give them a brand new day, kick out their oppressors and they would have the golden age of David that they wanted. That's not quite how Jesus saw it.

Now, Simon invites Jesus to dinner. He's a strictly observant religious man and Jesus is clearly head and shoulders above any teacher he has ever seen or heard. So it's time to check out Jesus. Maybe he could impress dinner guests with a miracle or two and wouldn't that be a credit. We're at Simon's house; Jesus came, did these miracles. But if nothing else, Jesus' presence would make for very interesting table talk.

So, the invitation is sent and the guests arrive at the appointed time and they recline around an impressively laden table. Simon is not giving himself away to Jesus, not yet. He omits the usual duties of welcoming with the foot washing and the kiss of peace. He's going to keep Jesus at arm's length, to check him out first. And that's when this woman enters with an alabaster jar. The alabaster jar is something they would use to perfume a body for their funeral. It was very important for them. It was a form of insurance in a way. So the reclined around the table and she approaches and kneels quietly behind Jesus and lets down her hair. Now, while God knows what the dinner guests were thinking, she bends over Jesus, weeps, soaks Jesus' feet with her tears, caresses them gently with her hair, kissing the soles and the toes and the ankles and breaks open this alabaster jar which is for her burial to anoint his feet with this costly perfume. This stuff would cost maybe a year's wages of an average working person. Jesus doesn't say a word. Neither does the woman, but they are communicating volumes. Now, can you imagine the scene, all these proper people? You have to wonder if the conversation stopped as the woman came in and began to weep and you wonder if the men looked because she let down her hair, something a woman wouldn't do. You totally have to respect a Muslim woman who wears the hijab because that's a part of her modesty. Well, they had that then too among the Jews and she took that off which would make her look like a loose woman. It is something a woman only did at home with her family, her husband, but

she does this in front of everyone. And then she begins to caress Jesus' feet with her long dark locks. And I wonder if Jesus, who never made anything easy for people, he captures Simon's gaze, holds it there, extending that discomfort, forcing his host to imagine exactly what is going on with every kiss that grazed Jesus' bare feet. And everybody in the room is scandalized, except for Jesus. Simon is disgusted. If he only knew...if he was really a prophet and he is disgusted with Jesus, not just the woman because he is tolerating all of this. Jesus isn't scandalized in the least. He gets it.

And then in that way he has, he tells a story. A certain money lender has two debtors. One owes little, one owes much. They can't pay. Both are forgiven. And Jesus asks Simon: which will love the money lender more...the one who owed little or the one who owed much? I don't know if you love your bank or does anyone have a personal relationship with your bank and you just love them? How many here are bankers? People just come up and shake your hand, fall at your feet, kiss your feet because you loaned them money? Doesn't happen, right? It's kind of crazy, kind of improbable. But this man says: well, the one who owed him more, of course. Now this story appears in all four Gospels. It takes different terms, like in John's Gospel it appears later, but Luke's version sets this story in the theological context of sin and forgiveness. Those who are forgiven little love little. Those who are forgiven much, love lavishly. And Simon's love is just a little bit thin because he doesn't recognize his need for grace. He's there trying to work his way into God's good graces and he doesn't need Jesus and anything else Jesus has, but the woman knows full well the extent of her own sin and she's feeling just the wide embrace of Jesus' forgiveness, so her love is boundless. She is willing to take the most costly thing she has, something that is uniquely hers and give it to him.

Now, why forgiveness? Why is this important? Well, consider that forgiveness is at the heart of the restoration of relationships. It's the releasing of any claim for any past injury, any offense and forgiveness cancels debts, opens up the future. Forgiveness restores the God given dignity of personhood and when you are forgiven, all those past limitations disappear and you are restored, you are renewed, you're set free. It's really important.

Now, Jesus is not inviting Simon to be more correctly religious; that was what Simon thought was the goal. But being correctly religious is always a problem to begin with, that Simon could not understand that the first step to a relationship with God is to believe that you are already accepted just as you are and you are. Simon could not understand that. He could understand that God comes to him not on the basis of anything that he has done or hasn't done. We're accepted because God is love. God is love itself and Jesus was demonstrating that God loves both Simon and this woman labeled the sinner alike. That's the radical hospitality of Jesus.

So, a teenage boy comes into church. He'd stop going because he felt he never measured up. But something was stirring in him. We call that the Spirit. We call it prevenient grace in Wesleyan terms and one Sunday he walks into the sanctuary a couple of rows behind his mom.

He kept his ball cap on, kind of sunk down into the pew, put his head in his hands and wondered: why am I here anyway? But he felt a hand on his shoulder and he thought: oh, great, it was somebody's pew. That's what people always think. There is not pew rent. This is part of the discipline; it goes back to John Wesley. People used to rent pews, that's how they paid for the church, right? And you would be in my pew, right? And Wesley said there is no pew rent in Methodist societies. So, live it up. Move over here or there or someplace. So, the kid is sitting there thinking: great. But he looks up and he sees a smiling face of an older woman and she gives him a little bag of fruit snacks and she says: I remember you liked this when you were young. That really touched his heart. Church wasn't so bad. Later on as he walked out, another person came to him and said: young man, in this church you take off your ball cap or you leave. He left.

So, why offer hospitality...the radical hospitality that Jesus offered both Simon and this woman? It's because Jesus has come to us with the radical hospitality of God, inviting us to follow him into the Kingdom of God, which is broken into our world with a new way of being. He invites us to a new way of being human, not on merit, not on the basis of you do this for me, I'll do this for you or you got me, I'll get you, that radical vengeance that everyone practices. Instead he invites us to believe that God loves us and accepts us just as we are and cares for us and that's a point of transformation for all of us that Jesus goes out into the world to love people and asks us to go out into the world to love those same people and to point people back to him and to the way to the Kingdom and the way to the Kingdom is actually through Jesus himself: I am the way, the truth and the light he says in John 14. You have Paul stating this later on in Romans: accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

So, what would radical hospitality look like here at Calvary? Well, actually it began with these two guys in green out there greeting one another and smiling and that was lovely. I really appreciated that, you know, that was great. And it begins with accepting one another just as we are. Instead of trying to edit people's lives or change their opinion, you just accept them as they are. And it begins with the desire to be at peace with people rather than to be right. And when we look upon one another with deep respect, with love and with care, it changes the conversation. It means hearing one another, working together as we keep Jesus at the center. And only then, can this go out from this room and out past the welcome center and out past the narthex and out into the doors and out into the parking lot. Because if we can't practice hospitality here with one another, we have nothing to offer anybody else. But if we can practice that and do it genuinely, we have a lot to offer.

You know and I know across America and not just America there is a pervasive sense of isolation and fear, but a church where Jesus truly is Lord builds bridges into that loneliness and fear. We won't divide along lines of race or color or nationality or gender or sexual preference or even sexual identity, about who is on the right, who is on left, what your politics are and what they aren't. One day you will give them all up and that won't matter at all. We want people to experience the loving presence of Jesus that we've come to know. That's my

prayer when I'm here on Saturday nights praying for all of you, that all of you would experience the presence of Jesus Christ and as we do that we'll extend ourselves to anyone and everyone, to demonstrate that love, not to just bring people in the doors, not to have a prosperous church, but to change the world with love, respect, welcome and acceptance.

So, imagine Calvary five years from now. We could be a stronger, more vital congregation and I think because the charter of your church goes back to bringing God back into the community, that has something to say to us here, that we could be a vital congregation who reflects the community that's changing all around us, a United Nations of differing people and backgrounds and cultures and colors and languages and preferences, united by Jesus as his living body here on Locust Lane. That's what we could do. Or we could be struggling with dwindling numbers and options and money that we can't pay and all that other stuff. So where does it begin? It begins with you and me. So, did you extend the hand of welcome to someone today? Did you go up to someone and say: you know, I can't remember your name, but I just want to, so help me out here. You know, did you seek to meet someone, get to know them that you didn't previously know? Did you notice a visitor and welcome them? And if not, why not? Haven't you been welcomed by God? Hasn't God in Christ welcomed you? The practice of radical hospitality for the sake of Jesus is not the task of some committee. It's your task and mine. Amen.

Let's pray: Gracious Lord, help us. Help us first of all to accept that we are accepted in you as your beloved and then as we look at everyone else, even people we don't know understand, drawn to or even like, people maybe we've had problems with, you love them. You even love our enemies. Don't let it drive us crazy. Instead let it transform us. Amen.