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“EXTRAVAGANT HOSPITALITY”

Mark 9: 33-37

Last month we celebrated Pastor Giuseppe’s 30th ordination anniversary. It takes a long time to become a good preacher.

A young minister attended a conference to better equip pastors for their ministry. Among the speakers was one well-known, dynamic preacher who got the entire crowd’s attention, and said, “the best years of my life were spent in the arms of a woman that wasn’t my wife!” The crowd was shocked! He followed up by saying, “That woman was my mother!” The crowd burst into laughter and he delivered the rest of his speech, which went quite well.

The next week, the young pastor decided he’d give this humor thing a try and use that joke in his sermon. Standing in the pulpit, he bent into the microphone and said loudly, “The greatest years of my life were spent in the arms of another woman who was not my wife!” The congregation inhaled half the air in the room! After standing there for almost 10 seconds in stunned silence, trying to recall the second half of the joke, the pastor finally blurred out, “. . .and I can’t remember who she was!”

Those of us who are retired pastors do have memory problems from time to time, but I’ll try my best.

What do people want today? That’s the question that drives marketing and politics in our society. Politicians change policies and even political parties based on what is popular. Companies change products and create new ones based on what people are looking for. It’s all about what people want.

Is the church supposed to be like that—to stick its finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing? Wouldn’t that make the church subject to every fad that comes along? And in a world that changes as rapidly as ours, is it even *possible* to keep up with what people want?

I don’t believe that the church is supposed to give people what they want if it means bouncing around from one fad to another. I believe we are supposed to offer people what they *need*.

What, then, do people need? As you consider the people who are *not* in worship today—the people who are still at home sleeping or reading the Sunday newspaper or out on the links or at the beach—what do they need in their lives? In my years as a pastor, I have learned one thing: people need to be cared about. People need to feel accepted.

Some time ago I spoke with a couple from our congregation who shared how alienated they felt by going to our fellowship hour. They were fairly new to the church and

went to the coffee time to make friends; but each time they ended up sitting at a table all alone because the old timers gravitated to their own tables of friends. They felt very rejected, like the teenager in the school cafeteria who is shunned by her peers.

Now there is a part of me that says, “Well, it’s not up to *me* to go out of my way to reach out to others! Others have to take a little initiative!” Really? I got to thinking about that idea—that it’s not our job to go the extra mile to show hospitality—and I discovered that the Bible doesn’t support such faulty thinking. From Abraham in *Genesis* who went out his way to welcome strangers at his tent in the desert to *John’s 3rd Epistle* in the New Testament we are taught to welcome strangers as friends. The very reason God called the Hebrew people out of Egypt and made them a nation was so that they might be “a light to the nations,” drawing all people to God. And when they failed at that task and became too self-centered and ingrown, they lost their privileged position, and Jesus came to create a new Israel, the believing church.

Our *Values Statement*, which is printed in every Sunday bulletin, reads, in part: “We...welcome equally all people, regardless of religious office, position, possessions, education, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability or other distinctions.”

That’s a pretty gutsy claim when you get right down to it, isn’t it? I mean, do we *really* welcome poor people, unemployed people, divorced people, diseased people, dysfunctional people, disabled people, old people, crying babies, people of different ethnic backgrounds or different sexualities? What about people with criminal records? What about drug abusers and alcoholics, gang members and Goths? What about known sinners? Just how far do we go in this wildly extravagant hospitality business anyway?

In my last church I received an email from a couple who had just visited a Sunday worship. It read, “We think it’s great to have such a large group of non-hating people right in our back yard and want to thank you for introducing us to that invisible part of our community.”

I had to reread the email to see if I had understood it right! Non-hating people?? What were they expecting? What had happened in their lives that they were glad to find people who didn’t hate them!? Most of us have no idea how some people are treated.

Dear family of God, if a church wants to grow, to prosper in the Lord’s work, it needs to get back to the basic need of people. We have to be a people of welcome. We need to be a place where people can come and not be judged, a place full of those ‘non-haters.’ We need to be a church where people are accepted for who they are. How, then, do we offer this kind of extravagant hospitality?

Our gospel lesson for today helps us to understand the meaning of an extravagant hospitality.

It begins with an attitude—not in the negative sense, but in a good sense. If we want to be a people of extravagant hospitality, we need humility.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks the church has in reaching out to strangers is its reputation for being “holier than thou.” It’s such a natural human inclination to count ourselves better than others, to be first in line.

A bus carrying ugly people crashed into an oncoming truck and everyone inside died. As they stood at the Pearly Gates, waiting to enter Paradise, God decides to grant each person one wish because of the grief they experienced in life. They're all lined up in a row when God asks the first one what her wish is. "I want to be gorgeous," she says. God snaps his fingers and it's done. The second in line hears this and says, "I want to be gorgeous, too." At the snap of God's fingers the wish is granted. And so it goes with each guy asking to be handsome and each woman asking to be gorgeous. All the while the last guy in line is laughing his head off. Finally, God gets to the last guy and asks him what his wish is. Calming down, the guy snickers and says, "Make 'em all ugly again!"

Next time you're last in line at a church buffet, think about that story. It might give you a little more patience.

One day when Jesus and his disciples were on the road, the disciples began arguing with one another. When they got to Capernaum, Jesus asked them, "**What were you arguing about on the road?**" They were silent. Why? Because they were embarrassed about arguing over who was the greatest!

Now that's a first-century reality show! It's so predictable—even among us who claim to be Jesus' followers. No matter how many sermons we hear on the topic, no matter how often we fall flat on our faces, we want to believe that we are just a cut above most people. But what does this attitude do to our chances of offering extravagant hospitality? How could we possibly welcome people with open arms when we think we are better than they are?

Do you know who will be drawn into an uppity, holier-than-thou, better-than-you, kind of church? More of the same! But what about all the broken and disenfranchised people, all those whose lives have run off the road and crashed? Where will *they* find a place?

Remember short Zacchaeus, hanging from a tree branch in his fancy robe, trying to get a glimpse of Jesus? It's such a vivid scene—the wealthiest man in town, making a fool of himself in his desperation. When Jesus stops and invites himself over for dinner—in other words Jesus wants to be his friend—the whole crowd goes bezerk. "**He has gone to be the guest of sinner,**" they lament. It was guilt by association. This was the behavior that fostered the gossip about Jesus, "**This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.**"

Are we okay with that? Are we ready to be labeled and condemned for our extravagant hospitality? Only if we have an attitude of humility, a willingness to see ourselves as of the same value as everyone else—even those society looks down on!

A second part of becoming a church of extravagant hospitality is recognizing the motive for this welcome. If we want to be people of extravagant hospitality, we need to see our mission in life as serving others.

One of the biggest temptations any of us faces in tough times is the tendency to pull in and think only about ourselves. When money gets tight in the family, we are mostly likely to stop being generous to others. The same is true in the church. But the whole purpose of the church is mission, isn't it? If we cease ministering to others, we have no reason for existing.

A few years ago an article appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel* entitled, “What Would Jesus Do?” It told about two Ripon College students in Wisconsin who set up a test of people’s willingness to get involved and help people. On a bitter cold night they had a fellow student lie face-down on the ground between the campus and local bars, pretending to be unconscious. Then they recorded how people reacted. Several well-known Christians paused...and then walked past the collapsed man instead of checking on him. Two girls, both active in campus Christian groups, quickly walked to the other side. (It was the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* all over again!) Do you know who ended up being the most concerned and compassionate to the guy on the ground? A group of drunken students! The very people who would have been thrown out of the church by the self-righteous!

Dear family, what’s wrong with this picture? How is it that those whom the Christian community often condemns acted more like Jesus than that community?

After catching his disciples arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus pulled the twelve aside and said to them, “**Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last and the servant of all.**” Ugh! We don’t like to hear it, but this following-Jesus bit is not about taking care of number one; it’s about taking care of others. It’s not about building a wall to protect yourself from those outside; it’s about opening your doors and welcoming people in so that they, too, can taste a bit of the kingdom of God.

How many people have been in worship in this sanctuary and never returned—not because they didn’t like the music, not because they didn’t like the sermon, not even because they didn’t understand the liturgy—but because no one ever said boo to them except when commanded to pass the peace? Every Sunday we have the chance to welcome people into our lives, even those we have seen for years in the pews but never really knew. The Apostle Paul told the Roman Christians, “**Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.**” What stronger motivation do we need for being friendly and accepting of others? What more could we wish for as a congregation of extravagant hospitality than to know that we do it for the glory of God?

One day when I was a pastor in Canton, Ohio, I found a group of young boys hanging around in the church parking lot. We got into a conversation when one of the teenage kids asked, “Can I see the inside of this place? I’ve never been in a church before?” How many people are living right under our noses and have never once been invited into the church? Years ago I attended a conference on evangelism where one speaker told us that we needed to advertise that worship is free because millions of people think that you have to pay to attend, just like a ball game!

If these things don’t drag us back to the business of extravagant hospitality, call us back to our mission statement to “bring light and love to the world,” I don’t know what will! How many people are looking for a place to be cared about, to be accepted, to be welcomed for who they are?

The last thing we learn from our Gospel has to do with rewards. If we want to be a people of extravagant hospitality, we will surely meet Jesus.

I have met a lot of Christians in this world who are sitting around, praying that Jesus will come back and swoop them away to a paradise without any problems, leaving the rest of humanity to suffering. But Jesus comes to us regularly *in the midst* of trouble! Jesus is always coming to us in disguise, and one of his favorite disguises is as a stranger.

Jesus would have been great at children's sermons. He was a master of object lessons. In our text for today, he had a different kind of children's sermon—a child *was* the sermon! Jesus finds a little child (and in that culture children were not adored as much as ignored), plops the child down in the midst of the disciples, picks the kid up and says, **“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”**

In other words, whenever we welcome people of little value in society's eyes, whenever we reach out with acceptance and love with extravagant hospitality to the poor and sick and suspicious, we will find Jesus in them. More than that, we will meet God in them!

Ed Lewis has a retired clergy friend who belongs to a rural congregation in North Carolina. Not long ago one of the wayward members of that small church died and left the congregation a bequest of \$10 million. You want to know the irony of this? That rich man spent the last years of his life as a homeless person on the streets of Tampa! There is a good chance that Ed and I might have offered him a blanket and a sandwich on some cold winter's night! You never know, do you? As the author of *Hebrews* says so frankly, **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”**

If you're one of those Christians who always says to yourself, “If I could just meet Jesus or an angel, or if I could just be sure of God; then I would live a more dedicated life!”...if that's you, then you need to get out and starting associating with strangers, welcoming them into your life because that's where you will meet the Lord you seek.

Whenever we help someone out, we are helping Jesus out. Whenever we welcome somebody we don't know, we are welcoming Jesus. That's our reward for hospitality—we get to entertain Jesus himself.

Well what if you're an introvert? Do you know, dear people, that 80 percent of all pastors are introverts? (Our own Pastor Giuseppe doesn't go on spiritual retreats to be surrounded by crowds. More likely he wants to get away from *us*!) My point? We do what God wants us to do, whether preach or talk to strangers, because God gives us the strength to do what God asks of us! God doesn't just come through for pastors, either. God's powerful Holy Spirit came onto the *whole* church at Pentecost.

“Okay, okay,” you may be saying to yourself. “But being so open is out of my comfort zone.” I know plenty about stepping out of my comfort zone. Although it may surprise you, I don't like being in front of crowds like this. And it was so hard for me as a pastor to go talk to a family that didn't like me or go visit a home where a son or daughter had just died or a father had just taken his own life. Those were the *last* places I wanted to go, the *last* things I wanted to do. But knowing the need was great, that *somebody* had to go, I stepped out of my comfort zone and kept my eyes on the need.

Think about these questions: Have you or someone close to you ever been discriminated against because of your looks or age? Have you or someone you love ever been judged by your race or ethnic background, scorned because you were female or gay? Have you or someone dear to you ever been treated as a second-class citizen because of some physical, emotional, or mental disability? Have you or someone you care about ever been looked down on because you didn't have as much money or social status as others? Have you or someone in your family ever been made to feel unworthy of attention because you came from a broken home, were divorced, or live in a different family configuration?

Dear family of God, in this very place we are surrounded by people who need healing and acceptance. We are called to be a haven to those who are hurting from the world's rejection. As one of my favorite hymns says, "Let your heart be broken by a world in need." If we do, if we *do* let our hearts be broken, we will be surprised at how fast those walls around our comfort zones come crashing down.

Being a church of extravagant hospitality is what Jesus wants of us. With humility and God's power, we can be that church—a church that serves others. We can demonstrate the truth that "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Why, if we lived like that, there wouldn't be enough room in this place for everybody! Let us be a church of extravagant hospitality because God has shown us the same.

Amen.