

## “Fruit of the Spirit: Radical Hospitality”

### Matthew 25: 31-40

For Lent this year, we will be studying and cultivating as practices in our lives the Fruit of the Spirit. You know, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control. Now before we all get overwhelmed and think that I expect all of us to have these perfected in our lives by Easter, let me ease your mind a bit.

When Paul was talking about this list, he was telling everyone that these are the results, the effects that happen to us, happen in our lives once we begin to truly live God’s way, which a way of hope, a way of grace, and a way of healing and wholeness for all of God’s creation.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the fruit we bear when we truly allow ourselves to be transformed into the people that God created us to be.

We cultivate this fruit of the Spirit in our lives by practicing a few spiritual disciplines on our faith journey, disciplines like, Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith-Development, Risk-Taking mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity.

It is through these things, these disciplines that we bear the Fruit of the Spirit and allow that fruit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, to shape and form every detail of our lives.

These five practices, Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service and Extravagant Generosity, are not new ideas. They are simply practices that we can cultivate in our faith life that can lead to spiritual growth, that can lead to a more complete relationship with God and with others. It is through these practices, when we live them out in our lives and in our faith as the people of God, that the Kingdom of God becomes manifest for all of God's people.

And since this is the first Sunday in Lent, we are going to be taking a look at the practice of Radical Hospitality and how this practices opens us up to God's love and challenges us to make room for God in our lives.

Now I know this text seems like an odd text to be lifting up as part of our discussion with Radical Hospitality. Usually this text is read on Christ the King Sunday, the Sunday that celebrates Jesus reign here on earth and in heaven and it certainly doesn't seem to fit the first Sunday in Lent, the Sunday on which we begin our journey with Jesus to the cross.

And let's face it, this text certainly doesn't seem hospitable when we read it in its entirety. Jesus is dividing sheep and goats, welcoming some and sending others to eternal punishment. In this text, it seems that Jesus is not the picture perfect host and he certainly isn't displaying hospitality, let alone radical hospitality.

The other disconnection comes for us when we take a look at the list of things Jesus commends. When we look at the list of things, things like feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, giving clothing to the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting someone in prison, when we look at this list of things, we realize that these things are no brainers for us as people of faith.

These are things we are called to do as disciples of Christ in the first place. This passage doesn't really challenge us to go beyond our norm, to go beyond faith's expectations. This passage doesn't seem to challenge us to do really anything radical at all in our lives so how in the world does this passage speak to radical hospitality?

On the first reading of this passage, I would agree with you. This list of things that Jesus mentions are already things we do as people of faith. We do these things to show God's love for the people of God. We do these things to show

God's grace for all of God's creation. There is really nothing radical about these acts listed in this passage.

But I want to push us a bit. There is hospitality and then there is radical hospitality. Unfortunately, usually when we think of hospitality, we assume that all this means is simply being nice to someone. This has led to a theology and practice of faith for the church, according to Henri Nouwen, of "tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of friendliness." Radical Hospitality calls us to more than simply being nice. It calls us to exceed expectations and go the second mile. Radical Hospitality calls us to not just take care of the least of these but to be in relationship with them as well which is exactly what this passage does.

This passage demands something more from us. This passage demands something more from us than good deeds to make us feel better or good deeds that we do to prove that we are people of faith. This passage with its radical hospitality demands a new way of being from us. It demands a new way of interacting with God's people within our church walls and outside of our church walls. This passage with its invitation to experience and give radical hospitality demands that we embrace our dual roles as people of faith because we are first and foremost guests in God's Kingdom and then called to be hosts to one another, and not just to the people we like or the people who are like us. This passage demands that we be hosts to the people everyone ignores or tries to push into the shadows. Each and

every group that Jesus mentions is a group on the fringe of society, people one just didn't associate with on a daily basis. Now, of course, a person of God would give money to the fund to eliminate poverty. Now, of course, a person of God may give a meal to a homeless person. But never, ever, did they sit down and break bread with them. How would that look?

But that is exactly what Jesus did in his ministry! That is the example Jesus gave us as his followers. He was a friend to tax collectors, prostitutes, poor, sick, and broken people. Jesus cultivated the Fruit of the Spirit through Radical Hospitality.

Or here is another way of putting it: In seminary, I used this passage from Matthew as part of my senior project. And I crafted what I thought was a brilliant powerful dissertation. I explained my theology. I explained my understanding of the role of the church. I explained how I envisioned the Kingdom of God being lived out here on earth, all based on this particular passage. I had 30 some pages crafted as a call to social justice that I believe this passage holds for us as people of faith to live out in our lives.

And on the day that I was called to defend my 30 page call to social justice, one of my professors after reading my papers, said, "Well, this is all well and good but Heather you forgot about the judgment element of this Scripture."

As I sat there in stunned silence, scrambling to figure out an answer, the professor shared something with me and it has stuck with me all this time. The professor turned to me and said, “Anybody can do good deeds for Jesus, especially if they know they are doing them with and for Jesus. No one is going to see Jesus and say, “Sorry buddy, can’t help you out today. What matters for Matthew in this passage, and matters for us as people of faith, is the risk we take when we do these deeds.”

What matters is the risk we as people of God take when we take care of the least of these.

You see, what my professor was telling me was that the judgment for the goats is not because they didn’t do the good deeds. The judgment comes in this passage because the people who didn’t do these things, didn’t take the risk. They didn’t exceed the very basic expectation of loving one another in word and deed. Judgment comes because they didn’t become deeply involved with the other nor did they allow themselves to be implicated or moved by the other person’s situation.

What Matthew is telling his readers in this passage, is telling us today as we begin to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives and in our faith through Radical Hospitality is that anyone can provide a meal to someone who is hungry but it

takes a follower of Jesus Christ to break bread with someone who is hurting.

Anyone can give a drink of water to someone who thirsty but it takes a follower of Jesus Christ to share the cup of the new covenant with someone who is lonely.

What Matthew is telling his readers and telling us is that anyone can take care of someone who is sick but it takes a follower of Jesus Christ to bring healing and wholeness to their wounds.

It takes a follower of Jesus Christ to manifest the Kingdom of God for others. And it takes a follower of Jesus Christ to allow those same others to manifest the Kingdom of God for and with us.

This list of things that Jesus lifts up are not heroic deeds or extraordinary feats. They are simple acts. They are occasions for grace. They are offers of mercy that we can offer and that can be offered to us. These things that Jesus lifts up has us seeing people as Jesus sees them and seeing Jesus in the people God brings before us each and every day. We do these things not because Jesus tells us it is a nice thing to do. We do these things because through them our eyes are open to the image of God found all of God's people. We do these things because God first did them for us, when God first welcomed us, when God first invited us to the Table, when God first claimed us and named us as one of God's own beloved children.

By extending radical hospitality to all of God, not because we ought to, not because we have to and certainly not because God requires it of us, we go beyond the “normal” expectations. We go beyond “tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of friendliness. When we extend radical hospitality, the Kingdom of God is made manifest for others and for us as well.

This week, I was trying to come up with examples of radical hospitality as illustrations for this sermon. And I came up with the usual: Our community Dinners, our clothing closet, Meals on wheels, offers to take meals to people but are these radical? Do they go beyond the norm? In some ways yes, and in some ways no. Each of these activities do good things for people in our community. And yes, I would go as far as saying that in some way, through these activities, we are changing lives. But are we making the Kingdom of God manifest here and now for the people in our community through this mission opportunities?

I’ll be honest, I struggled to answer this question.

Then it hit me. A few weeks ago, we hosted a funeral for someone in the community and the family was gracious and appreciated the meal and the care. But then a few weeks passed. I decided to reach out to this family, to check in on them and I was told my phone call couldn’t have come at a better time. The grieving journey was hard for the family and things weren’t getting any easier.

But this conversation wasn't what caught my attention when it came to Radical Hospitality. What did was the family's reaction to the offer of meals. The family said, "We thought no one cared. We thought we were alone. We thought everyone had forgotten about us."

You see, Anybody can bring a meal to someone who lost a loved one but it takes a follower of Jesus Christ to sit down and break bread with someone who is hurting. And that's what happened. The first meal was delivered and it could have easily been just dropped off at the door with a simple hi and good bye. After all, these people didn't go to our church. No one really knew them well, except for a few people. A meal could have easily been shared and then we could all feel good about ourselves because we were doing a good thing.

But that isn't what happened. someone took the meal in to the family and they began to talk. They began to share things about their life. They began to form a connection.

You see that's what Radical Hospitality is. It invites all, all of God's children to come and experience that God is with us, here and now. It invites us to experience God's presence in the fellowship and connection with broken people, just like you and me. Radical Hospitality invites us to come and experience that

God is with us in the ordinary elements of bread and wine, in the ordinary elements of casseroles and potlucks, in the ordinary elements of giving a drink and tending the sick, in the ordinary elements, concrete needs of our neighbors. Radical Hospitality invites us to experience the presence of God made available for all and to all in the seemingly small gestures of mercy we offer and that are offered on our behalf each and every day.

Radical Hospitality invites to be in relationship with the least of these and to see everyone as our brother and sister in love.

Anyone can do the things on Jesus' list but it takes a follower of Jesus Christ to recognize God in the face of our neighbor, to meet God in acts of mercy, grace and service we offer to and to accept these gifts when they are offered to us.

May we embrace the invitation to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit through the practice of Radical hospitality each and every day. Amen.