

“Gathering as Friends—*Offering Radical Hospitality*”

John 2:1-11 – January 17, 2010

INTRO: The Gospel of John “places this miracle story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry—it’s the inaugural event of his ministry.” (Gail O’Day) As Jesus responds to a shortfall of refreshments for the guests at a wedding, he gives people a glimpse of the kinds of powers and gifts he can offer to them.

A few weeks ago, some friends invited me to their anniversary party. I received an e-mail invitation, which took me to a website where I could leave a note that I would be attending. I looked at the number of people they had invited, and the number of people who already said they would be there, and wondered just where in their small house they were we going to put all these people. Not only did all these friends of theirs want to come, but we probably all knew that Kate is a great cook, and looked forward to the variety of goodies she would have. She didn’t let us down. She had three tables full of all kinds of cookies, dips and veggies and chips, spinach dip and good bread, home-made candy, little cheesecakes, spicy meatballs, and these wonderful baked creations made with crabmeat and cheese. I watched Kate make three batches of a dozen each, which were promptly devoured by her guests, until as she took the last batch out of the oven, she looked at me and said there was no more crabmeat in the house. Obviously there was other food, but this hungry crowd would have kept eating them, if she could have fixed more.

The other night I heard a kind of parallel story that when Carol and Janet Smith purchased the piano that sits in their living room, they invited lots of friends to come over to hear a concert by a professional pianist. To their surprise, just about everyone came, and they remember their guests overflowing into a number of rooms, as they enjoyed the music. The large crowd made for them a memorable day, even though they maybe had to maneuver a bit to find a seat for everyone.

Maybe the hosts of the wedding feast had the same problem—more people might have shown up than they had planned. Or maybe the guests present, just ate and drank more than anyone could have expected. However it came about, they ran out of wine. “Jesus’ mother alerts him to the problem of the exhausted supply. The party had come to a desiccated halt: bone dry.” (Gerard Sloyan)

And if we are thinking that in the lands of the Bible, wine was drunk everywhere and in big supply, we might want to think again. Wine “was a cash crop for vintners, like olive oil. At a wedding, a couple’s parents would have scrimped and saved long to do it right. Family and friends passed harsh judgments on those who could not carry a wedding off in style. Sheep and calves and every delicacy would have been served in profusion and the wine would have flowed freely.” (G. Sloyan) Which may have been the case, until too many thirsty people showed up. We can only imagine the servants watching the wine supply being depleted, and the wine steward not wanting to tell the host that they had no more, until Jesus gets to work. The story tells us there were 6 stone water jars, each one holding 20-30 gallons of water. They probably stood two to three feet tall. These were jars that were used by people for ritual washing. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with fresh water, and suddenly they have 150 gallons of the best vintage—wine that would usually have been served first, but here they’ve got the good stuff late into the celebration.

In the miracle of the water turned into wine, we not only see Jesus’ power, but we see the transformation that can happen when God’s spirit is let loose. Something new happened there as those old jars were filled with new wine.

I’m a little doubtful that Jesus knew everybody at the party. Yes, he was there with his disciples, and his mother was also there, but there may have been lots of people whose names he didn’t know. Yet, even though he didn’t necessarily know the whole crowd, he used his gifts and generously provided for any and all. The hospitality wasn’t limited to those who came early to the party, or those who might have known Jesus from their association with him in Nazareth. Jesus offered the best to all.

I heard of a person who volunteers for Interfaith, the older adult ministry whose Wauwatosa office is in our church. At Thanksgiving, this volunteer made two pies for the elder she has gotten to know, who couldn’t see well enough to bake the pies any longer, but whose family was coming for Thanksgiving. So, here’s a pie baker, sharing her gifts with people she didn’t even know and might never meet. She simply did something she knew how to do.

Miep Gies, died this past week. She was the office secretary of Otto Frank, who said on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday last year, “I simply did what I could to help.” (NY Daily News, 1/13/10)

“For more than two years, Miep risked her own life daily to illegally protect and care for the Franks and four of their friends hiding from the Nazis in a secret annex behind a warehouse. She provided them with food, clothing, and books during their years in hiding — to the best of her ability she addressed all of their daily material needs. (Jewish Virtual Library)

Miep was the one who kept Anne’s diary safe, and eventually returned it to Anne’s father. Miep probably had the closest connection to Otto, his wife and daughters, but she also cared for four other people—persons she may not have known well. But that didn’t matter—she offered her gifts to them, just the same. They too were people in need.

Think of all the volunteers who are trying to help people in Haiti. People who are simply willing to share their gifts with people they’ve never met, but who are people in need.

When people come to our church, they may be coming here because they have a particular need and we can probably do more to welcome them. The first part of our mission statement says we “Gather As Friends.” You can find the statement most weeks, on the front of our worship bulletin. I’ve been thinking about that line. It doesn’t say we gather “with” friends, but we gather and try to interact as friends would. It means we may have people with us on a given Sunday that have never been here before, people we’ve never met. And whether we’ve known someone 50 years or five minutes, we are to offer hospitality to them. To carry out that part of our mission statement to me, I believe we need to do more about offering hospitality to one another.

Robert Schnase, a UM bishop serving in Missouri, has written about what he calls the radical hospitality the church needs to offer. He says: “A congregation is a school for love, the place where God’s Spirit forms us and the place where we learn how to give love to and receive love from friends, neighbors, and strangers. The greatest contribution we can make to the Body of Christ is inviting someone else or helping a newcomer feel genuinely welcome. Hospitality is more than common politeness to newcomers, name tags for greeters, or a few visitor parking spaces, although these are important. Hospitality is a quality of spiritual initiative, the practice of an active and genuine love, a graciousness unaffected by self-interest, an opening of ourselves and our faith community to receive others. Radical hospitality means that there’s no self-satisfied attitude, ‘Now that our needs are met, we’re happy.’ People offer themselves to Christ by offering Christ to others.

Little things can have big effects. I’ve known people who have joined a church and remained lifelong members because of the personal handwritten letter they received following the first week they visited by a member they did not know. People have joined the church because when they first visited and their baby fussed, a woman leaned forward and said, ‘Don’t worry. That’s the way I feel about this sermon, too. But come back, they get better.’ Then the woman offered to walk the baby in the foyer so the visitors could stay in worship.

Radical Hospitality begins with a single heart, a growing openness, a prayerful desire for the highest good of a stranger. It begins when one person treats another respectfully and loves the stranger enough to overcome the internal hesitations to invite that person into the life of Christ’s Church.” (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*)

And, in case we have forgotten, when we give of ourselves, we also receive back in the process. The woman walking with the baby and getting acquainted with that new couple, she received gifts as she shared her gift of hospitality.

To be honest, most churches haven’t consistently been very good at radical hospitality, and we may not be different than most. When we are either satisfied or have become so comfortable ourselves, we may fail to even think about the experience of the newcomer. We may know some people here, in fact we may even say they are our friends. But, we forget that when a person walks through our door, our mission is to be as a friend to them—gathering as friends. We need to act more like a friend, more welcoming, more aware. It’s been a number of years since we’ve had a crew of greeters in our church—that could be one ministry we could reactivate. Our coffee hour could be a place where new relationships are built, but that ministry needs some help too.

When the worship service is over, we might want to look around us, and if we see someone we don’t know, BEFORE we start to talk to someone we’ve known for a long time, start a friendly conversation with the other person—who might just be here for the first time.

I know this may not be our first instinct. Our first instinct might be to stay in the comfortable territory of those we already know. But think about the other people who might become as friends

to us, that we miss connecting with because we can't step outside our comfort zone.

These are not always easy changes to make. We would prefer to just stay in our own identified pew. And, in general, the church doesn't make changes easily.

There is a cartoon about a man who was trying to sell a bus to a church. And in his sales pitch, the dealer points out that the bus is especially designed for church use. It has one gas pedal, three steering wheels, and most importantly, it has eight sets of brakes. (*Emphasis-Bowen*)

When a new idea comes down the pike, we seem to use at least eight sets of brakes. Yet we follow Jesus who went way beyond what was typically expected, and has the power to transform us. He's the one who turned water into wine. If he can do that, if he can make something new happen like that, think what he can do in our congregation, if we but let him.

I believe we can do a better job of offering a friendly welcome around here. But it's going to take some people who are willing to invest something of themselves to make it happen. Take a look at the "You Can Count On Me" sheet today, and if you would like to see us get better at being hospitable, if you have a heart for that—please indicate so on that sign-up sheet. And, please don't wait for someone to call you, to see if you would be willing to help. Simply know that we're all called to take responsibility for the ministry here and realize our church needs you.

We need to have faith that God can transform what may be our meager efforts, into something much greater. It may not involve clay jars of water, but it involves people with feet of clay, just like you and like me, who would be thrilled to get to know you as a friend, within this community of faith.

--Sue Burwell

