

Radical Hospitality – Sermon

Sisters & brothers, it was last year at Annual Conference that I fell in love with the title of a book straight away:

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.

Radical Hospitality

Passionate Worship

Intentional Faith Development

Risk-taking Mission and Service

Extravagant Generosity

The book by Robert Schnase had just made its way into worldwide Methodism. Schnase, the Bishop of the Missouri Conference of the United Methodist Church in the USA, had published it in 2007. And it took about a year and one General Conference to meet (the worldwide body of the Methodist Church), to pay the book the attention that it has deserved outside the US.

We came across the book at Conference last year. My wonderful husband immediately ordered a copy on-line. And there I was. I couldn't stop reading.

I got so fascinated by Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity... that I sometimes thought Robert Schnase must know us, and must have been writing long parts of the book for me and Peace Church alone.

I read the book once.

I read it a second time.

This time with a marker to highlight what I liked most & what I regarded as most important, significant and valuable. I was so impressed by the book and by what it did to me that I suggested to the Council on Ministries that we should all read it. The members of the CoM fortunately and to my great delight agreed. We ordered 12 copies – one for each member of the committee to read over the summer. The idea was, once we'd all read it, we'd meet for a day and discuss and review what we had read.

On an October Saturday we all met and shared our individual and pretty similar experiences. None of us had disliked the book. All of us were equally touched, moved & motivated by it. By the time we met, I had read it a third time – in order to write a summary of it, which served as a presentation that helped us all to start on common ground when we had our Saturday retreat.

We worked and talked “through” the book, and faced the challenge of the tasks & questions that followed each chapter. We talked very openly and with an amazing honesty about our life and faith journeys, about our roles and responsibilities at Peace Church, about the challenge and blessing this international congregation is for us and our families, and about the dreams and visions we have for this community we have all fallen so much in love with. At the end of the day each of those present made two commitments: one personal, and one for the congregation. In five minutes we all filled two small sheets of a memo pad...

The reading of Robert Schnase's brilliant book had inspired us to all sorts of things: from giving more money to the church on a more regular basis, through to spending more time on spiritual growth and Bible study. We came to the suggestion that the five chapters of the book were great themes to preach about.

...said and done!

One Sunday in January (which is today), and four Sundays in February should be used for Schnase's book.

And here we are today.

With chapter one.

Radical hospitality.

Radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity are qualities, so Schnase, which people search for when they look for a church. He underlines it with the beautiful sentences: "God uses congregations to make disciples – congregations offer the gracious invitation, welcome and hospitality of Christ, so that people can experience a sense of belonging; God shapes souls and changes minds through worship creating a desire to grow closer to Christ; God's spirit nurtures people & matures faith through learning in community. With increased spiritual maturity, people discern God's call to help others through mission & service; and God inspires people to give generously so that others can receive the grace they have known."

In his foreword Robert Schnase admits to how fascinated he himself was, when he discovered the simple power of these clear expressions that became the subtitles of the book. And he urges his readers not to keep for themselves what they've learned through the book, but to share it with others to the glory of God.

So, let me share with you today, what I learned about radical hospitality, and its meaning for my own life and faith.

In Romans 15:7 we read: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

And from here Bishop Schnase leads on to saying that Christian churches should – **out of nothing more and nothing less than genuine love** – invite, welcome, include and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the body of Christ.

Christian hospitality comes from an active desire to invite, welcome and receive... - and care for those who are strangers so that they find a home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ!

Since God's invited me & I have found a home – here in this church and in the Christian faith – I can now accommodate the needs and receive the talents of those who are new. When I show hospitality, I express God's invitation even more than my own.

By practising hospitality, Robert Schnase writes, we become part of God's invitation to new life, showing people that God in Christ values & loves them.

Has Robert Schnase been to Peace Church, I wonder?

When he reminds us of the words Jesus said in Matthew 25: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," Schnase touched my fondest memories of having been a stranger in a foreign land and as such starting to feel a sense of belonging and feeling at home.

He writes: we belong to the body of Christ because of someone's hospitality. Someone invited us, encouraged us, received us, and helped us feel welcome – a parent, a friend, a spouse, a pastor or even a stranger. By someone's love we were engrafted onto the body of Christ. If we had not felt welcomed and supported in some measure, we would not have stayed...

And with this he set in motion a whole series of memories in which I remember acts of welcome – and acts of rejection. Even though I am glad to be able to say today that the acts of welcome have a stronger impact on my memory than those of rejection. Thank God!

I recall my first experience of welcome – of radical hospitality – in a strange land, after I'd left home just before my 20th birthday. This is decades ago.

I left Stuttgart with a night train to head for Ostend and the ferry to Dover. With me I had a suitcase and one of those huge rucksacks, containing mainly books and clothes, a photo of Reiner and some traveller cheques... - yes, this was before the cash and credit cards and all that...☺

I'd followed a job offer to work in a farming community in North Yorkshire. And I arrived on a foggy day in early September on which you couldn't see your hand in front of your eyes. I came to the house in which I was supposed to live. The fields on which I'd work, the neighbouring farm, even the workshop in which I would help out in the afternoons, were hidden behind thick fog – a mystery to me.

I was the youngest of the co-workers there. And most of the other single people were men. It was hard to find out whether any of them was a committed Christian. Or whether anyone went to church on Sundays.

Since the community I lived in was offering a home to mentally disabled adults, Sundays were tough days. The disabled needed more attention and care in the house than they did on weekdays. On weekdays they would all have jobs in their workshops, but on Sundays their free time had to be filled – and they needed us to help them with that. Often it was my turn to cook Sunday lunch – for 10 to 15 people – no easy job for somebody who'd just left school.

So it seemed: no church on Sunday mornings.

Free time on Sundays started after lunch and the washing up. And on one sunny autumn Sunday I set off alone to walk over the moors. And climbing down into the next dale I heard the sound of an old, squeaky organ. After a while I could make out a few voices, too. And – some of you know the story; forgive me for telling it again – what they sang was my favourite hymn: What a friend we have in Jesus...

I had discovered a tiny country chapel – typical for Methodism in good old England -, and silently slipped into a service that had already started.

An ancient – that's what he seemed to me – lay preacher was preaching to 5 or 6 old farmers' wives whose families must have worshipped in this place throughout the centuries. (Today the chapel is long closed).

After the service this handful of people talked to me, asked me where I came from, who I was and whether I was a Methodist. Yes, I was. And I told them of the remote hamlet in which I now lived and worked.

We said our goodbyes & wished each other well, and I walked home feeling so much less lonely than I had earlier in the day.

And guess what happened?!

On a weekday afternoon in the following week this Methodist minister in his black cassock showed up at my door, and invited me to come to the service in the main church of the circuit on one of the following Sundays – no matter which one I could make.

It was an hour's walk to get there. And since I was not allowed to drive one of the community's cars, we agreed that I'd walk there, and he'd always give me a lift back. How very nice and generous of him! Encouraged by this I asked to have 2 Sundays off per month, and started going to church.

On one occasion when Kenneth Alton, that was the pastor's name, gave me a lift back home, I shared with him my dream of becoming a minister. This was an unpopular dream in the German context, since at that time there were no female ministers in the South Germany Conference to which my home church belonged. In Britain however, women had started coming into the ministry in the 60's of the last century. So, in 1982 when I told Kenneth Alton of my heart's desire and my call, this was nothing unusual to him at all. Kenneth Alton was in his last assignment before he would retire. The congregation were mainly older people, and a handful of families with teenage children. They showed a surprising interest in me, the young stranger, and offered an abundance of welcome. They did this, although they knew that I would only stay for a year or two, and then would go back to Germany where the "man of my dreams" was waiting for me.

What moves and strikes me most is to remember how these people opened themselves towards me, how they supported me, even though they knew that I would not stay long term (in the eyes of a small local country church that is ☺).

They could have ignored me, or at least kept me in the pews for "visitors"... Instead, they invited me in, made me a part of them; and with Kenneth Alton's support and encouragement I wrote and preached the first sermons of my life – in English. There was neither doubt whether I could do this, nor rejection because I was a woman, a foreigner, or still so young. Nothing of that.

What this congregation in Danby in the North Yorkshire moors gave to me, is one of the most precious experiences (not only of welcome) in my life. They let me come in, they took me seriously, they let me try out my call, and they assured me which path to follow in my life.

I have never seen them again. I only know that they still remember me and my preaching. (Liz Smith told me so, when she visited just for curiosity some months ago, when she was back in England to see her mum).

I cannot give back to the people in Danby Methodist Church what they've given me. I can't even say thank you – at least not often enough. I can only live my life as a minister as well as I can, and offer to the world, to the church, to you, those gifts and talents I was privileged to discover while I was part of this small congregation in the North of England.

Through the practice of Radical Hospitality, the early Methodists as well as Methodists today express the gracious welcome of God in Christ. God seeks relationship to people. God's grace activates interest and eagerness for relationship. God encourages people to reach out in love, Robert Schnase writes.

And I would like to add: God enables people to make other people very happy.

What happened to me in North Yorkshire, I do not see as the result of my being so wonderful & interesting & promising. It happened because those who welcomed me were a generous community of grace, filled to overflowing with God's love. And from that they were happy to give to me.

They did not invite me because it made their statistics look better. They knew I'd leave again.

They did not let me try out my call because they had any hope that one day I'd be their minister.

They did not care for me because I was of financial use to them. I had no salary, just some pocket money.

They simply welcomed a nobody – just for her own and for God's sake, and by doing so gave her a chance to discover the purpose of her life.

All a congregation should follow when they welcome new people is to keep in mind that we can draw people into relationship with God – and change their lives. To live in community with others, Bishop Schnase writes, is part of God's plan and intention for us. A congregation is a school for love...

Kenneth Alton & his church in Danby surely were this for me: a school for love!

Peace Church is that, too. You are – we are for each other: a school for love with all that that involves...

Please remember my wonderful experience in North Yorkshire once more, when you hear another sentence by Robert Schnase: **The church, he writes, is the presence of Christ in the world, the means by which God knits us into community in order to transform our lives & the lives of those around us.**

Mine was transformed. Sure enough! And because of that I will always help a newcomer feel genuinely welcome, so that he or she receives what I received.

Some years after my North Yorkshire experience, when I was halfway through my training for the ministry, it was hard to find a place for internship within the German Central Conference. Nobody wanted the woman...

It was in 1986 when a telegram from Liverpool saved my life: My wonderful friend Robin Hutt who hardly knew me at that time, responded to the question whether I could come and share with him in his congregation in Elm Hall Drive (just across the street from Penny Lane and Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band): Yes, Chris! Do come!

A week later I flew over and again... But that is stuff for yet another sermon. I guess what I am saying is: I wouldn't be here today, and I would not be the person I am, and I would not have made wonderful long term friends, and I could not do the job I am doing at present, had I not been welcomed and given a chance... more than once in my life!

Let me finish here for today by quoting one last powerful bit from Bishop Schnase's book:

The power of an invitation to change a person's life must never be underestimated!

Thanks be to God! Amen.