

*Practicing Hospitality:
Beyond Coffee Pots and Nametags to Genuine Welcome*
Epiphany 3A
January 23, 2011
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My first congregation was in the small town of Herrington, Kansas. On Wednesday of my first week at work, I got an unannounced visit from one of the old stalwarts in the congregation. He did not have a happy look on his face. He informed me that during the previous month a youth group from a Lutheran church in California was passing through town. They were on the way home after a national youth gathering. They had arranged to stay at the church overnight. Since it was a Saturday night, the plan was for the group to get up in the morning, roll up their sleeping bags, and go to church before heading out of town. There was only one slight hitch: they didn't have any dress clothes. So they came to worship in shorts and t-shirts—all 45 of them, including the youth director.

The man sitting in front of me was visibly upset. I could understand. I grew up in a church in which people wore their Sunday best. To this day, I still wear a suit and tie to church. The man went on to tell me that he wanted the youth director to be fired. And he wanted me to make sure it happened.

Hmm, let's see, I'd been a pastor for all of three days. To be honest, I really didn't feel like sticking my nose in another church's business. So I tried a different approach. I asked the man, "What do you think Jesus would have done? Don't you think Jesus would have wanted them to go to worship even if they didn't have the right clothes?" I felt good about my response. I fully expected the man to say, "You're right, Pastor Vern. I never thought about it that way." But no, the man blurted out: "Jesus would have told those kids, 'Next time pack better clothes.'" And he stormed out of my office.

It's been thirty years since that conversation. Today we're undoubtedly more relaxed about what we wear to worship. But the question still remains, What do you think Jesus would have done about that youth group? How welcoming would he have been? That's an important question, especially in light of our focus for 2011: *creating a place for all to belong*. Despite my "Sunday-best" upbringing, I happen to think Jesus

would have been far less concerned about the youth group's personal appearance and far more concerned about the condition of their hearts. The Jesus I read about in the gospels had a way of making room for some of the most unlikely people and in some of the most unlikely ways.

We get a first-hand glimpse of Jesus' welcome as he begins calling disciples. Jesus has been baptized. God has welcomed him into the family. Now Jesus is being sent on a mission of welcome. And he's looking for a few good people to help him. What's amazing is that he starts with a group of fishermen. There's nothing wrong with fishermen, of course. But keep in mind: Peter and Andrew, and James and John have probably attended very little school. Moreover, if they showed any real promise in school, they would have been asked to continue in their studies, and maybe even to train under a rabbi. Obviously that didn't happen. Most likely Peter and Andrew, and James and John were not the cream of the crop. They were dropouts. So they got involved in their fathers' fishing business instead.

One day a rabbi named Jesus comes walking their way. Somehow, in the midst of the nets and the fish and the waves, he gets their attention. Then he does the most remarkable thing: he invites them to come and follow him. How could they possibly say yes?

Now, it's easy to imagine that Jesus must have been highly charismatic, that he somehow overwhelmed them with his personality. But I don't think that's what happened. I think those fishermen dropped their nets and went with Jesus because he made room for them, because he welcomed them in a way they'd never been welcomed before. In effect, Jesus, the rabbi, was saying to them, "I see potential in you. I want you to help me welcome others into the kingdom of God. I want you to follow me." And they did...gladly.

We're in the middle of a sermon series on *creating a place for all to belong*. Over the last couple weeks we've been talking about the things we can do to practice hospitality: nametags, friendly greeters at the door, user-friendly bulletins, mouth-watering doughnuts in the lounge. These are good, practical things to do. As we go through the year I encourage you to put on your thinking caps and come up with as many bright ideas as you can.

Still, I think Jesus' invitation to the first disciples goes deeper than a simple act of kindness. At the heart of it, *hospitality means being open to new people*. Jesus goes beyond first impressions—status, clothing, the size of their boats—and invites these rough-around-the-edges fishermen into his life. The welcome he shows them challenges us to consider how open we are to the people we meet everyday.

Noel and Ann Peterson have a story to share about being open to new people. [Noel: “Last fall I heard about a welcoming practice at Jacob’s Well, a mission outreach of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. The mission at Jacob’s Well is ‘not about the building, but about the people.’ They encourage their regular attendees to sit in a different location for worship every week. And they have something called the *three-minute rule*. For the first three minutes after the service ends, the regulars talk only to people they *don’t* know—visitors, people they’ve seen at church before but haven’t spoken to, etc. Ann and I decided that we’d move out of our ‘assigned pew’ to see what might happen.”

Ann: “The first Sunday we tried it we arrived a little late for the 8:30 service. Our ‘assigned seat’ (row 6 on the candle side of the sanctuary) was taken, so we found a seat on the pulpit side, about three rows from the back. Lo and behold, there was one of my young teaching colleagues and her husband. They were looking for a church home. If we hadn’t changed seats, we might never have been able to welcome them and introduce them to Pastor Jason. So try it—you might like it! Just be sure to tell your regular seatmates (and the pastors) what you’re doing. Otherwise they might think you’re missing!”]

When we set about to really welcome people, it means being open to them. We introduce ourselves and get to know their names. Hopefully we move beyond categories like employed/unemployed, rich/poor, black/white, single/married/widowed, high school graduate/PhD. Hopefully we move beyond these labels and look for the God-given potential in each person. It involves making room for them and inviting these people into our lives. It’s about creating a place for all to belong.

Hospitality can mean being open, not only to new people, but to a new way of doing things. Jesus invites Galilean fishermen to drop their nets and head out on a brand new ministry of welcome. This has to be incredibly hard for them. They’re leaving

behind those things that make them feel comfortable. They have to learn a whole new way of doing things.

Zumbro, with its rich tradition, can be a little intimidating in this regard. Let's be honest: there can be a "Zumbro way" of doing things, and those new to the scene are bound to get nervous.

Jan Vetter has a story to share about this. [Jan: "When joining Zumbro in the early '80s, I wasn't working outside the home. I had time to volunteer. Wanting to get more acquainted with members of the church, I volunteered to serve on the Funeral Committee. When called, I came willing to work. I was assigned to butter the buns for sandwiches. I was teamed with an older lady, now deceased. I buttered the first bun. The words I heard coming out of her mouth were, "You don't even know how to butter buns!" She proceeded to show me how to butter buns 'the Zumbro way.' That evening I shared the story with my husband. I ended it by saying, 'And to think we joined *this* church!' I learned a valuable lesson that day: we need to be open to the gifts and different ways of doing things that each of us brings to our church community."]

When we set about to really welcome people, we need to be open to their new ways of doing things. Of course, this doesn't mean we can accommodate every new idea under the sun—we probably don't need a new meatball recipe for the Bazaar. But it does mean that we can at least listen, and engage, and seek to learn from them. And who knows what God might have to say to us through the stranger that comes walking into our life. Again, it's about creating a place for all to belong.

When you think about it, Jesus is no longer with us in human flesh. Rather, he seems to prefer showing up in some of the most unlikely people, and in some of the most unlikely places. If you want to see him, like the disciples, you need to be paying attention. He might show up in a youth group from California wearing shorts and t-shirts to church. He might show up in a group of uneducated fishermen along the Sea of Galilee. He might show up in someone you're talking to during a three-minute connection. He might show up as you're buttering buns for a funeral. Indeed, Jesus might show up in just about anyone.

And that's where the challenge comes in, doesn't it? It's a lot easier to see Jesus in the lives of some people than in others. It's a lot easier to be welcoming if the people

we're welcoming are—well—likable. But what if they're not? Sometimes, with some people, if we want to see Jesus in them at all, we may have to modify our idea of what Jesus looks like in the first place.

Friends, as you work at practicing hospitality in your life, spend some time reflecting on what Jesus would do if he were in your shoes. This rabbi who made room for a bunch of fisherman, who made room for the blind and the lame, seems to have room for everyone, including you and me. He wants you to come and follow him. If you do, he will want you to join him in his ministry of welcome. Who knows what might happen? He might lead you beyond coffee pots and nametags to a deeper hospitality. He might lead you to a more genuine welcome of new people and new ways of doing things. He might even lead you to a new way of seeing Jesus himself.

And through it all, you will be *creating a place for all to belong*. Amen.