

MESSAGE: “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Shift #1: From Fellowship to Hospitality

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to distinguish between ‘fellowship’ and ‘hospitality,’ and to encourage a church cultural shift favoring ‘hospitality.’

When I met with our former and current District Superintendents to discuss my appointment to the Auburn parish, I was asked to ‘engage the congregation in conversation regarding themes identified in a book called Shift, by Phil Maynard, with which the Church Council had been working. In speaking with members of the Council, I learned that there were mixed feelings regarding the book, coupled with a measure of anxiety about changes that might arise from it.

What we may or may not do with the ideas of the book is up to us to decide through thoughtful and prayerful discernment, but I do want to honor our spiritual leaders’ request by presenting the five ‘shift’ topics as best I can over the first five weeks of Lent. Each is reflected in Scripture and encourages us to experience ‘church’ in a way that is real, meaningful and relevant to the world in which we live.

Perhaps a metaphor will help us. When I was nine-years-old, I complained to my parents that I could not see the blackboard at school and that things were looking rather fuzzy. They took me to an optometrist who examined my vision and, through a series of tests and calibrations, identified a lens that would aid my sight. Glasses were created and purchased. To this day, I remember my amazement when I wore those glasses for the first time. The world came alive with a clarity I had long-since forgotten! My vision ‘shifted,’ and life became so much the better for it. To be honest, there was a period of adjustment. I had head-aches for a few days and sometimes removed the glasses to give my eyes a ‘rest,’ but the benefit far out-weighed the liability. I discovered a new ‘normal,’ and my effectiveness increased exponentially.

The five ‘shifts’ we will be looking at have the potential for bringing our faith, worship and cooperative ministry alive in a way that we may not have experienced in awhile—but only if we consider them with an open heart. I invite you to explore the clarity they offer for each of us as followers of Jesus, for our church as a witness to Christ and for our world which Christ came to save. The first is a *shift* from ‘fellowship’ to ‘hospitality.’

Read: Matthew 25:31-46.

As pastor of the United Methodist Church of Auburn, I have been delighted to hear from visitors and newcomers that our church is a welcoming church. My work is so much harder, if not impossible, when the culture of a church is not welcoming. I know. I've been there. But here's the thing... Almost every church thinks it is a friendly church, though we know some that are not. For those who know, enjoy and love one another, the church fellowship interaction will feel friendly, warm and welcoming. Who doesn't enjoy spending time with friends they understand, like and love? This is the joy of Christian fellowship!

But what if you don't know anyone? What if you don't know how to break the ice and start a conversation? What if a fractured life experience is what gave you the courage to walk through the doors of a church for the first time? You don't know where the sanctuary is, where the bathroom is, where the nursery is. You don't know who the pastor is, or anyone's name, or whose seat you may be sitting in. You don't know what is expected or even how to get started. If you see clusters of people--talking to one another, laughing together, and having a great time, while you suffer in isolation, invisible to them, you might feel lonelier than you would on a deserted island.

Churches that have great fellowship, but little capacity for hospitality, will never feel friendly to the outsider, newcomer, questioning, or marginalized. Unlike fellowship, which flows from the stories friends relate to one another, hospitality watches for the one who is not a part of things. Hospitality takes initiative to welcome and engage the one who is visiting. There is, of course, a caveat there. Sometimes those who are visiting need the gift of sacred space and may not be looking to meet others. Hospitality notices this, too, and respects the boundaries that are set.

The goal of hospitality is to encounter people where they are, to anticipate and meet their needs, and to honor their gift of presence. The hospitality that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 25 goes further still: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." What a marvelous picture of hospitality! He is saying, "You came to me, sought me out, noticed me, and did all you could to meet the needs of my life." Why? Because you cared, and because you cared, I felt the love of God.

It is equally telling, perhaps, to notice what Jesus does not say to the sheep of his parable. He does not say, "I was searching, and you preached to me," or, "I was sinning, and you set me straight," or, "I had doubts, and you told me what to believe." Radical hospitality celebrates the humanity of each one God sends by offering kindness rather than by telling or correcting.

I appreciate the sign that was posted outside a church in New Hampshire for its sense of hospitality. It read, "Epping Community Church--where everybody is somebody and Jesus Christ is Lord." It implies 'significance and belonging,' two basic needs of every human heart.

There was once a homeless woman who came regularly to the Soup Wagon that offered nutritious meals three times a week. One of the servers, the benefactor of the operation, noticed her; engaged her in conversation, listened to her story, and cultivated a gift of friendship. One day she did not show up for the meal. The server didn't think too much of it, but when she did not come the next time, she inquired as to the woman's whereabouts.

"She's gone to hospital," one of the recipients told her, "She's likely dying even as we speak." After serving those gathered, the benefactor went to see her at the hospital. Sure enough, the woman was dying.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked her friend.

"Yes," the woman replied, "I don't want to die like this. I have nothing and no one. I don't even have an orchid to cheer me up. I used to love orchids so much as a girl."

When her friend left the hospital, she arranged to have five hundred orchids delivered to the room of her friend. Later that night, the woman died. According to the nurse on call, her last words were, "Look at all these beautiful orchids! I'm dying as if I am somebody!" With a smile, she breathed her last.

Fellowship communes with the friends we have; hospitality rejoices and weeps with the friends we've yet to make. Healthy churches make a point of doing both, but the accent shifts toward hospitality.