

Thank you again for welcoming me here as your Transitional Pastor. I mentioned last Sunday that clearly this church is proficient at hospitality. It seems like the normal and kind thing to do, doesn't it? We invite each other to dinner. We send e-vites and throw parties. We take people to lunch, or linger on a porch over drinks and stories. It's very pleasant. By trading off who hosts a meal or a party, over time we can generate highly mutual friendships. These hospitable traditions bind us together, and they are well worth keeping.

Following Jesus, though, stretches us beyond our comfort zones. Jesus preaches and practices another kind of hospitality. Radical hospitality. What could be radical about hospitality? Well, the Hebrews text [13:1-6] that Tom read starts right out saying that Christlike hospitality welcomes strangers and prisoners. It seeks to include people we don't already know and trust. It welcomes people who can't pay us back.

The word radical means "at root." If hospitality takes root at the very core of a person, or of a community, it becomes radical, transformative, boundary-crossing. To help us glimpse what radical hospitality could mean in the kingdom of God, let's hear a few stories.

First, from the gospel of Luke, chapter 14. I'm reading from the Common English Bible.

¹ One Sabbath, when Jesus went to share a meal in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely.

Remember that Jesus' creative way of following God has angered the Pharisees through most of Luke's gospel. Now he sits at table with his enemies, and they watch him like hawks. But Jesus is watching them, too.x

⁷ When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host. ⁹ The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give your seat to this other person.' Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place. ¹⁰ Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, 'Friend, move up here to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹ All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

¹² Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. ¹³ Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected."

A host throws a lush banquet and invites people who are bankrupt, sick, wounded, mentally ill, experiencing homelessness. Emilie Townes, Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, says that "For Jesus, extending genuine hospitality to the least [privileged] through acts of unselfish[ness] and kindness

can wash God's blessing over us and give us a sense of the great blessing that is to come in the resurrection."¹

We are awash in God's blessing when we extend unselfishness and kindness — radical hospitality.

My college classmate Carrie had gotten my attention for quite a while, but it took persistence to convince her to go out. Eventually she gave me a chance and we spent several months dating. We went on trips, I met her family, we were about to graduate, and just about when she finally decided this was a good idea, decided that she really liked me...just about then I realized I was more interested in someone else. I was young and fickle. I broke up with Carrie and she felt truly hurt. But I didn't worry much about that because I jumped into a thrilling new relationship.

Of course there came a karmic turnabout. That same year my new girlfriend dumped me. In my grief and my sense of rejection, I realized that this is what Carrie must have felt. At Christmas I wrote her a contrite letter. She might not want to see my name, but I had to apologize. I expressed sorrow for how I had treated her. I told her I better empathized with the pain of being rejected. I asked her to forgive me. I didn't expect to hear anything from Carrie.

To my surprise she wrote back right away. Carrie graciously accepted my apology. She went on to startle me with an invitation to her upcoming wedding. Turns out she was marrying another classmate of ours.

So the next summer I drove up to rural Maine, to the ski lodge where they were getting married. The wedding was supposed to be outdoors in a gorgeous glade, but rain forced all of us inside the lodge for the ceremony. We'd sit at tables already laid out for the reception. As people gathered I wandered the room looking for my place card. I couldn't find it. I thought maybe Carrie's invitation was spontaneous and she forgot to include me on the official guest list. I didn't deserve to be there anyway, so I planned to stand quietly at the back wall.

One of the attendants recognized me and asked if I had found my place. I told her no and she said, "Oh, I saw your name over there." I walked where she pointed, and found my seat at a table at the front of the room. Carrie had placed me with her mother, her sister, and her best friend. I thought there must be a mistake, but when I saw Carrie that day she gave me a big hug and assured me that's what she intended. That day I learned what being forgiven feels like. And I learned about radical hospitality. I didn't *deserve* to be invited at all, and here I was placed at a head table, in a seat of honor, an ex-boyfriend sitting with the mother of the bride. That wedding banquet changed me.

The grace of undeserved welcome can be transformational — radical hospitality.

When Covid hit, Second Presbyterian in Nashville scrambled — like you did here — to be Christ's church in a time when we couldn't safely gather in person. I was serving as one of Second's pastors.

That spring and summer of 2020 also brought the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and too many other people of color. The Black Lives Matter movement blossomed, and many white Americans belatedly awakened to how much our society still privileges whiteness and undercuts people of color.

¹ Townes, Emilie M. "Luke 14:1, 7-14: Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word — Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2013. p. 68.

At Second Nashville the session soon felt convicted to put up a prominent Black Lives Matter sign outside the church. But one of our session members, a thoughtful retired woman — you know, the typical troublemaker profile — she said, “Wouldn’t our signs carry more meaning if people could see *us* holding them, confessing that *we* want to do better?”

And that’s how it started. For a couple of hours on a Tuesday afternoon folks from Second gathered along the street in front of the church, giving friendly waves and raising handmade signs showing care for Black lives and for all people of color. Our people came back the next Tuesday. And the next, and the practice continued most Tuesdays for a whole year.

Sometimes just a handful of church folk could be at the demonstration, and other weeks all the way down the block people held signs. Our crowd tended to be middle aged and older, with youth and young adults taking part as their schedules allowed, and sometimes a 93-year old would bring her sign and her warm heart. Some neighbors who had no other connection to the church asked if they could come hold signs with us. Yes!

I’m not saying that this was risky hospitality for white church folks. People driving by mostly honked politely in support, or looked shocked to see white church folks protesting. Some cars completely ignored us. Once in a while a driver would throw an angry look or a middle finger. One guy stopped to talk, earnestly trying to figure out if we read the same Bible he did. Yes, but maybe not the same way.

One afternoon a blue pickup truck drove past the demonstrators. A minute later I realized the same truck was coming back the other direction, much more slowly. The driver then pulled into the church lot. A young Black woman and an older Black man got out and came toward us. They walked down the entire line of sign-holders, looking each person in the eye and thanking them individually. The man said, “You can’t know how much this means to us.”

Radical hospitality happened that day when two people with every right to be wary about white folks, even well-intentioned ones, stepped toward a group of strangers and offered their generous hearts and words. They thanked us simply for affirming that their lives mattered, a truth that *should* have been preached on this continent for the last 400 years, especially by all who follow the Lord of radical hospitality.

Confession and generosity create possibilities for redemption — radical hospitality.

Jürgen was just 17 when he and his classmates were drafted into Hitler’s military.² As he served, he and his fellow soldiers had almost no idea what was happening in the broader war. Jürgen and his company marched around Germany getting shot at, sleeping always outdoors, becoming infested with lice, feeling desperately hungry, reading Goethe’s poetry for some small comfort.

As his fellow troops were killed off and all order fell apart, Jürgen was reduced to drinking water out of puddles. He lost his glasses. So when an English soldier jumped up in front of him in the woods, Jürgen cried out “I surrender.” The British troops did not shoot him, and in fact they gave him some baked beans, his first meal in four days. He loves baked beans to this day.

² Moltmann, Jürgen. *A Broad Place*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009. p. 15ff. This story is condensed from parts of that book, his autobiography.

Transferred through a series of prisoner of war camps, Jürgen eventually found himself, of all places, in Kilmarnock, Scotland. Jürgen spent nearly three years there. He wrote later,

The Scottish overseers and their families were the first who came to meet us, their former enemies, with a hospitality that profoundly shamed us. We heard no reproaches, we were not blamed, we experienced a simple and warm common humanity which made it possible for us to live with the past of our own people, without repressing it and without growing callous. True, we had numbers on our backs and prisoners' patches on our trousers, but we felt accepted as people. This humanity in far-off Scotland made human beings of us once more. We were able to laugh again.³

Jürgen's family had not been religious. So when an army chaplain in Scotland gave out Bibles to the camp, Jürgen wasn't sure what to make of it. But the psalms of lament began to ring true to him, as did Jesus' experience of Godforsakenness. As Jürgen read the gospels over and over, he was "slowly but surely seized by a great hope for the resurrection." Jesus became for him a "brother in suffering and [his] companion on the road to the land of freedom."⁴ Jürgen says, "I am certain that then...and there, in the Scottish prisoner of war camp, in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought me and found me."

The hospitality of Jürgen's captors extended even further. When he showed academic aptitude, he was transferred to an educational camp in England, where even *theology* classes were available to the POWs. By 1947 Jürgen decided he would dare to be a rebel in his "enlightened" family: he would study theology and become a pastor.

Jürgen sums up his POW experience like this: "We received what we had not deserved, and lived from a spiritual abundance we had not expected."

Amid the brutality of World War II, Jürgen Moltmann found kind treatment as a prisoner of war, despite the horrors perpetrated by his country. That radical hospitality of his enemies showed young Moltmann what Jesus is like, and he came to Christian faith.

Moltmann returned to Germany in 1948. He did become pastor, theologian, author, peacemaker, passionate advocate for all people to experience freedom in Christ. In 1965 Moltmann published a hugely influential book called *Theology of Hope*, orienting Christian faith toward hope in God's radically inclusive future. Moltmann became one of the most important Protestant thinkers since World War II. His experience of Christ's hospitality created a theologian who has so inspired my own faith.

A desperate, surrendering soldier fears mistreatment and receives instead baked beans and a Bible — radical hospitality.

Jesus transcends conventional hospitality by revealing that with God the last will be first, and the least will be lifted up. Jesus looks around the table at all of us and asks, "Okay, who's missing from this resurrection party, and how can we make them welcome?"

In the name of God the Host, the Guest, and the Invitation.

³ *ibid.* p. 29

⁴ *ibid.* p. 30