

## **An Unusual Kindness**

*(The following message is the fourth in our series titled *The Journey to the Cross: Four Practices to Prepare Us for Easter.*)*

### **1 Peter 4:7-11**

My grandparents were models of hospitality. I used to love to take my friends over to both their houses.

My mom's folks loved to sit and talk and laugh. My grandfather couldn't walk, and so in him you knew you had a captive audience, but most of the time he was the one doing the talking and telling jokes. The rest of us could walk just fine, but we stayed put, sitting at his table.

My dad's parents were from Italy, and so most of their hospitality centered on food. My friends in junior high and high school used to love going over there, especially on baking days, because my grandmother would put plate after plate of delicious things in front of us.

The language barrier never stopped my grandfather from telling stories. He would start in a sort of broken English, but as he got going he would slide back into his distinct southern Italian dialect, and then I'd have to stop him every so often to translate.

What made my grandparents hospitable—what they knew about hospitality—was a lot more than just opening the door and offering some food. My grandparents knew how to share their lives with people who came to visit them in their homes. My friends still remember so much detail about my grandparents' lives—whether it was about coming to Los Angeles from Nebraska, or from Italy. About battling polio on one side or losing a son in World War II on the other.

The comfortable chairs and the great food were just the means—just tools for making someone welcome. The real hospitality was in the telling of stories—the sharing of lives and experiences.

Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for our remembrance and celebration of Christ's love for us as we find it in the Easter miracle. Over these four Sundays we're exploring some practices that will prepare our hearts and minds for Holy

Week and Easter. The habits and practices we're looking at are prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality.

Each one of these serves to help us understand and experience what Christ has offered to us—each one of these gets us out of our regular routines and practices and makes Lent and Easter more meaningful. As a part of that we've been saying the Lord's Prayer five times each day in the run up to Easter—we've been calling it the *Lent Challenge*...sounds exciting, doesn't it?

As we come closer to the end of this year's journey to the Cross, it's important for us to notice that all four of the practices and habits we're talking about: prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality—all four of these are relational practices. They're ways that we interact with God and with each other—ways that we make the values of God's Kingdom become a part of the way we live each day. Keep that in mind as we make our way toward Easter Sunday.

*7The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. 8Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 11If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

Don't you love the way that starts? 'The end is near!' You can picture someone walking around in a sandwich board... OK, now purge that image from your mind. That phrase is really there to cultivate an attitude—a posture of expecting Christ's promises to come true at any time.

This letter was written to a group of churches in modern-day Turkey—communities of Christians who were learning to live their faith in a hostile culture. There wasn't a widespread persecution going on at the time it was written, but there were local attacks throughout the Roman Empire against churches and Christians. The main point of the letter is that we're called to live differently because of our faith, and that sometimes that means we'll be rejected—feel uncomfortable—even have to suffer.

The writer uses the language of the weak to describe how Christians were

supposed to engage their culture. He calls them exiles or slaves or aliens to make the point that living as a Christian in a hostile culture won't be easy.

In our passage today the message is that the way we treat each other and the world around us is a sign of the God we believe in. Our actions—what we do in our daily lives—is meant to communicate who God is and how much he loves the world he made.

Part of that is this idea of 'ungrudging hospitality.' 'Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling,' the Scriptures say.

What do we need to know about this idea of hospitality? Finding some sense of what it meant then will help us figure out what it means now, and for that we'll look just briefly at another passage where the same word appears.

In Acts 28 Paul was shipwrecked on an island with Luke and some of the other apostles of the early Christian faith. Luke tells the story like this: 'Once safely on shore, we found that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.'

The word that translates to 'hospitality' in our text this morning is in this passage, too. But it's not the obvious choice—it's not where Luke says 'they built a fire and welcomed us because it was raining and cold.' It's not the word 'welcome.' The word that translates in our text to hospitality, in this text translates to 'unusual kindness.'

I love that. It's not normal kindness—it's not the sort of kindness you can fake or put on. It's unusual kindness—the unusual kindness that comes from going the extra mile—from reaching out with generosity and grace and even transparency. Unusual kindness leads us to see people who have been shipwrecked somehow, and build them a fire and get them out of the cold. I can see them sitting around, glad to be alive, telling stories about what had just happened.

This is where I learned so much from my grandparents.

In my grandparents' homes the telling of stories became a sort of nurturing, healing act. When my friends and I listened, we found ourselves being taught and mentored—prepared for adulthood by learning from the stories of people who were a few generations ahead of us. For my grandparents, the sharing of the stories

became a way healing the pain from things that had happened to them.

One of my grandfathers couldn't walk. He'd survived polio in the 40s but did his best to move and work and even play, despite his disability. He and my grandmother had a hard life, but they found joy in opening their home to anyone who wanted to come in. They couldn't go every place that they wanted to, so they made their home a place of welcome and the world came to them.

My Italian grandparents lost their oldest son in 1944. They'd hardly had time to learn English before they had to navigate Army red tape and plan a funeral in their new country. There were two huge portraits of my uncle Pasquale in their house, one in a suit and the other in his Army uniform. The pictures were so big that they became a part of the conversation whenever anyone came over for the first time. It was a happy home, but it was seasoned by this one tragic event, and it helped them to talk about it over the years as people got to know them.

Like I said before, my grandparents' hospitality was a lot more than just comfortable furniture and food. It was about the way they shared themselves—their stories and their laughter and their sadness—with people who came to visit.

Why is that important? Because the hospitality we're called to show as Christians is more than just being welcoming people, even if it starts there. It's a lot more than just food or coffee hour or a handshake.

Christian community—true hospitality—is about sharing life together. It's about entering into each other's joys and struggles and even each other's pain. We do it not because it's some weird magic exercise that God asks us to do because it entertains him. We do it—we enter into the lives of our friends and neighbors and even strangers, and allow them to do the same with us—we do it because Christ did it for us first.

Let me put that another way: *True Christian hospitality is when we allow someone to be close enough to us that they can see both our brokenness and what Christ is doing to redeem and heal it.*

If Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for remembering and celebrating Christ's sacrifice for us—if Lent is about stripping back the facades we make and looking honestly at how our lives are being transformed by Jesus—and Lent is about all of those things, by the way.

If Lent calls us to remember, then it also calls us to share. It's in that sharing—the sharing of our lives and stories—that we become people of true welcome—people who demonstrate that unusual kindness we see in the Scriptures. We don't do it because we're great—We do it because we've been loved greatly.

When we think about it that way, it's not really about our houses or churches at all. And as much as I love being a product of my two different families, true hospitality becomes less about following our ethnic and cultural traditions, and more about being transparent about our need for God no matter where we came from. It becomes less about the comfort of the furniture and the quality of the food we serve. It becomes less about where we are and more about who we are.

I've been reading a book this week called *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*. There are a couple of quotes from the book on the front of your bulletin today.

The author writes this about where true hospitality happens: 'The place of hospitality therefore does not require a fixed location but a people—a people who share a common life of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace and, most centrally, of worship. Where then do we lay our heads? All of these practices teach us that we lay our heads upon Christ and each other, and in doing so reveal the beauty of Christ's body to the world.'

See, hospitality has a point—it isn't an end in itself. We practice true Christian hospitality because *in some tangible way it reveals the beauty of Jesus Christ to the world*. Because in ways that we might never be able to put into words, the graciousness and welcoming and fellowship or true hospitality demonstrates the way we've welcomed and given grace by Christ himself.

That's why we stand and confess what we believe when we baptize—when we welcome someone new into the family. We start the story there, and promise to keep telling the story as long as we're together.

In the Presbyterian Catechism that we're using in our confirmation class, one of the questions is about how we treat others, especially those of other faiths, Here's what it says:

'As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness,

generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth...I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand, and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.'

That's it. That's the essence of Christian hospitality. *We're called to welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of us.*

There's some risk in that, right? Taking down the walls and facades we've built means that we'll be exposed somehow to the people in our lives. Let's be honest—for a lot of us, coming to church means putting on our best face, not our truest face. It means acting how we think we should act, not how we really are.

But if we're looking to Jesus as the model for how we should live and love and forgive and show hospitality, then we have to acknowledge that he took all those risks for us first.

He came, he lived and loved, he shared his stories and wisdom, and he became vulnerable even to the point of death.

As we move into Holy Week next Sunday—as we reflect on Christ's sacrifice and prepare our hearts for the joy of Easter morning, remember that it's the little things that matter most. It's the unusual kindness God invites us to share in our hospitality that becomes a visible mark of the way the Holy Spirit is working in our lives.

My prayer for all of us is that we would learn to open ourselves to people in our lives, even the strangers, and that we would welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of each one of us.

To do that we need to keep ourselves connected to the one who goes ahead of us even now. The Lord's Prayer keeps us linked to God and his plan. Let's pray that prayer together this morning.