

**Sermon:** Don't Just Go to Church...Be the Church!  
**Text:** Matthew 10:40-42 NLT  
**God's Word:** Hebrews 13:1-3 NLT  
**Date:** Sunday, July 2, 2023  
**Preacher:** Rev. Becky Stephens

***Matthew 10:40-42 NLT***

<sup>40</sup> "Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father who sent me. <sup>41</sup> If you receive a prophet as one who speaks for God, you will be given the same reward as a prophet. And if you receive righteous people because of their righteousness, you will be given a reward like theirs. <sup>42</sup> And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded."

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Have you ever thought what the church would look like if we really, and I mean really, ministered the way Christ calls his followers to minister? You know...if we did things the way Christ did. It's possible we wouldn't even have church buildings! We would just be out in the world, preaching and teaching about the good news of God's justice and mercy, and the promise of God's coming kingdom! That's what Jesus did, isn't it?

So what exactly would it look like if the church really acted as the Body of Christ in the world? A former District Superintendent told of a colleague in ministry who made an observation that went something like this: "If the church was really being the church in the way that Christ calls us, we would never lock our doors. We might walk in and find homeless people sleeping on the pews and that would be 'OK.' We might discover that some of our Bibles or hymnals have gone missing, and that would be 'OK.'" The list could go on. And, unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that issues of safety these days prevent the church from working in such ways. But that doesn't mean that we should be any less hospitable. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't always be seeking radical ways to welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the least, the last, and the lost.

Our gospel reading from Matthew this morning invites us to explore in depth the quality of the welcome that we offer to one another within the Body of Christ, the church. But with it we must also reflect on the welcome we offer to those who are not yet a part of this body! As Jesus speaks to the disciples here, he is preparing to send them out to preach the message that "the kingdom of heaven is near." He is

giving them authority to heal the sick, to raise the dead, and to drive out demons in his name. Christ knows that he is sending the disciples into a difficult situation, as they will surely face much opposition along the way. And so Christ urges others to be hospitable to those who come in his name. During times of persecution, hospitality was especially important, and could even be dangerous; think "harboring a criminal." So Jesus says to all who will hear that those who provide hospitality and show kindness to God's people will be greatly blessed!

So who are God's people? To whom, exactly, are we called to be hospitable? Obviously, this passage implores us to be welcoming to missionaries and those who carry the good news of Christ around the world. But Christ calls us also to serve the poor, the outcaste, the sick, the lost, the sinner. These are all people of God as well, these too are bearers of the Christian message, and they need our hospitality as much as any other!

Have you ever given much thought to what keeps you coming to this church? What is it that you love about this church? There are certainly many different factors that bring us into a certain church. But I think that when it comes to those things that keep us at a church, it boils down to the fact that this is the place where we experience the love of God in Christ Jesus in the most real and tangible ways. This is our family. They care for us when we are going through difficult times. We hold one another accountable when we are not living our lives in a way that is consistent with our Christian faith. We share with one another the love of Christ in the same way that we have experienced Christ's love ourselves. I think it's fair to say that we experience from one another genuine hospitality.

But just as much as the church is about serving one another, it's even more so about serving the world in Christ's name! If we are really being hospitable and welcoming in the way that Christ teaches us to be, we would extend those acts we do for one another out into the world. We would build relationships with those we don't know. We would serve our neighbors just like we serve one another. As you sit here, I imagine that each of you could name people you know who are not attending any church this morning. And each of you could probably think of a sanctuary full of people who are not in church today! That's hundreds of people WE know who are not a part of the Christian community!

More and more we find that people are drifting away from church; that young people are growing up without the love and unconditional acceptance which is experienced in the church of Christ. Children are raised thinking that "Jesus Christ" is a curse word and nothing else! So the question for us today is, as the faithful of

Christ, how are we going to follow his example and serve those beyond these walls? Welcome others as we have been welcomed? Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?" That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles. He waded right in and helped! This too is genuine hospitality, and it is the kind of radical hospitality that Christian churches should practice!

If we take Jesus seriously about being hospitable and welcoming "the other" into our midst, it changes our behavior! It changes the way the church looks in the world! John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced hospitality in ways so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found it offensive. Wesley preached to thousands on roadsides and in open fields in order to reach coal miners, field laborers, factory workers, the underclass, and the poorest of the poor; people that were all but forgotten. He invited them into God's Kingdom and nurtured in them a strong sense of belonging as he organized societies and classes for mutual accountability, support and care. Those early Methodist's lives were so radically changed that it actually staved off a violent revolution in England. It's amazing the impact the Gospel can have on entire countries!

We are called by Christ to welcome others and practice hospitality because people are messed up and lost. And the only way to get straight and become un-lost is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We practice hospitality because we care. There is a right way and there is a wrong way. There is life and there is death. There is only one way to be in relationship with God, only one way to change lives, only one way to live in community with others. And when we are truly being Christ's hands and feet in the world, we open that way to everyone we meet! We welcome them in the same way that we have been welcomed by Christ! We serve them in the same way that Christ has so sacrificially served us!

This is not just a membership drive! Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare, and work toward the purpose of helping others receive what we have received in Christ. Hospitality is more than simple politeness to newcomers or mugs for our visitors, though these things are important. Radical hospitality is a spiritual act, the practice of genuine graciousness and love that has nothing to do with self-interest.

Let's face it; we are comfortable here because this is where we are loved and accepted. But if we are being the church in the way that Christ envisions the church in this world, we would also feel a bit uncomfortable, restless, if you will. And we should feed such restlessness because we realize that so many people do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Do we have that restlessness?

We live in an inhospitable world. People simply do not go out of their way for one another. Many folks go to work day after day with little or no satisfaction from a job well-done. Whenever something goes wrong, we find someone to blame. Everyone is so busy taking care of themselves, they don't have time to worry about anyone else. There has to be a place where people know they are welcome, loved, respected, wanted, and needed. And that place is the church, Bucyrus United Methodist Church! Are we up to the task?

If we are welcoming to others in the ways we are welcoming to one another, it means that we will work together with an ever-present awareness of the person who is not present, our neighbors, our friends, and our co-workers who do not know Christ as Savior and Lord! In every ministry, we work on how to reach those who are not yet here. There is no place for the self-satisfied attitude that thinks, "Now that my needs are met, I'm happy." No, we offer ourselves to Christ by offering Christ to others in everything we do! Good intentions aren't enough! Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are as quiet as adults, more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority. We can do better. Little changes have big effects.

How are we doing with our hospitality? How can we make it more like the radical hospitality we see in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Christ? Jesus has invited us all to join him in the Kingdom; he died in order to make that invitation possible. The least we can do is extend the invitation to others that he died extending to us! At some point, I will be doing a sermon series about why church is important. I think it's a question that many people in this world have -- why membership is important, why giving is important, why missions are important. This is a great opportunity for you to extend an invitation to any and all who are not yet a part of a church family. Such simple invitations should come naturally. We have no problem telling others where we get our hair cut, where we get our car fixed, where we like to eat.

When someone new starts at work or school or someone moves into the neighborhood, in addition to the regular gestures of welcome, let's add: "And if you're looking for a church, I'd be happy to tell you about mine. I love it, and it's meant the world to my family, and we'd love to have you come with us sometime."

At other times, when we know someone is facing a difficulty in their marriage or is suffering the grief of loss, let's not be afraid to say, "Something that helped me was talking to my pastor. I know she'd be willing to talk to you, too. If you want her

name or would like for me to call her, I'd be happy to help and I know she would too."

We pray to God for those people who are in our lives. Why not invite them so that they can have the kind of relationship to God that we have? Every member of the Body of Christ is the fruit of someone's ministry and faithfulness. Who is the fruit of yours? It's never too late to start...

So don't just go to church...be the church!