

A New Kind of Hospitality

Sermon by Susan James

Damascus United Methodist Church

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; St. Matthew 16:21-28

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – August 28, 2011

It is so wonderful to see you this morning! I wish I had buttons to give you that said, “I made it to church after Hurricane Irene!” Greetings from England! Even though it’s been two months since we returned from the English choir tour, I still like to pretend that the trip just happened and that summer is just starting.

But the kids and parents here know the truth! To all of you Montgomery and Frederick County students: Good luck tomorrow on the first day of school!

If you’re like a lot of families, you’ve been busy trying to get school supplies together. Oh, those supply lists! “This is what your child needs for school,” they say. Like composition books! Every year, our kids were required to get multiple of these. At the end of the year, they would have decorated the front cover and written on – at most – five pages. I did a quick scan of our used composition books and realized that we still have Mary’s from 2nd grade – and she finished college a year ago! Let me just say that our family will never run out of scrap paper!

This is the time of year when we focus on what children need...all to help them, we think, become educated, productive, well-adjusted members of society. There’s schoolwork, sports, clubs, instruments, friends. Before we know it, their lives have become a punch list of activities and carpools.

But our trip to England made me aware of something else children need that I had taken for granted. Children and young people need the opportunity to grow spiritually as well...a chance to develop a relationship with God. They need to be actively invited and welcomed into a faith community.

Imagine, for a minute, that you are on our English tour, getting ready for the youth to sing at a Sunday morning service in Dorset. We’ve been in England barely 24 hours and are still adjusting to the time change. The church is over 100 years old, built of stone with lovely stained glass windows.

I look around...Where is the congregation? There are more DUMC adult chaperones than actual church members. Where are the children? Where are the young people? Where are the people even my age?

A week later, we’re at another Sunday service, this time at a beautiful Methodist Church in Bristol. The pastor exclaims, “What a joy it is to see our sanctuary full this morning.” Full, I think? Even with all of our chaperones, half the pews are empty.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression that I was judging these churches or their congregations. We had so many wonderful experiences ... Like well-attended concerts advertised with big banners created by the churches. And the amazingly thoughtful hosts, like the one who gave each boy staying with her his own jar of orange marmalade. Or the charming lady who decorated the church sanctuary with English and specially ordered American flags to make us feel at home.

But at many churches, the question remained, "Where is everyone?" We heard stories of how hard it was to run a church with fewer and fewer members. Some churches – even with the grandest of buildings – had fewer than 50 members.

When I asked hosts about this, I got similar answers: "Oh, the young people don't go to church. They don't seem to believe in God." They said it with a sense of detachment, like it was a fashion statement. And by young people, they seemed to mean everyone under the age of 40 or 50.

Not believe in God? How could this be, in a country with more magnificent buildings of worship than I had ever seen in one place?

I started thinking: if the adults stop going to church and stop believing in Christ, how are their children going to be given a chance? In the matter of one short generation, what happens to Christianity?

This phenomenon of non-belief has been written about extensively in England and Europe. It actually has an official name: a post-Christian society. A post-Christian society occurs when a people or a country experience the decline of Christianity, where life is no longer rooted in the language and assumptions of the Christian faith. Over time, the values, culture and views guiding people's lives lose their connection to religion. But if their values and choices are not rooted in God, what are they rooted in? In our reading from Matthew today, Jesus asks, "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

One fallout in a post-Christian society is the dying off of churches. Based on the rate of shrinking church membership in Canada, for example, certain denominations run the risk of having no members by mid-century.

The attitude towards churches themselves also changes in a post-Christian society. One pastor wrote that churches will be visited based on their value as tourist attractions. They'll be like the old castles that people want to see because they are historic and architecturally impressive. A minister in Europe has even taken to collecting stories of how far society has moved away from a Christian understanding. He recalls a young woman visiting a famous church, where the tour guide explained that the number thirty-three was incorporated into the architecture because that was the age that Jesus died. "Really," the young woman said, "That's awfully young. What did he die of?"

Can you imagine reaching the point where the knowledge of Christianity is so limited that people do not know about Jesus' life and the saving grace of his death and resurrection? Don't children and adults alike deserve the chance to learn about God's love and experience that love with others?

A question closer to home is, how can we keep Christianity alive and vibrant in our own country?

Fortunately, Paul's letter to the Romans offers a starting point. He urges us to truly care about others by saying, "Let your love be genuine," and gives a number of suggestions for how they can make their Christian community strong. Paul then says, "Extend hospitality to strangers. "

Hospitality. After seeing England, I truly believe that we may need to think of hospitality in a whole new way, much broader than just being friendly to people who show up on our church doorstep. How can we effectively reach out to others and let them know that they matter to God and to us?

The United Methodist Church has been actively exploring this question, because our U.S. church numbers have also been declining. They have a new initiative focused on starting new churches to attract younger and more diverse members. They literally are using the 2010 U.S. Census to determine where the population is growing but where people are not going to church. They call this "church planting."

How many of us had our own faith planted and nurtured by the spiritual hospitality of others? Kelly Bratburd grew up in a family that didn't go to church. Fortunately, she says, her grandparents took her occasionally. They said that she loved it – standing on the pew and singing the hymns. These early, limited religious experiences were enough for her to decide, that as an adult and in her marriage to Barry, she wanted church to be part of her life. [At the 10:15 a.m. Service, "And, isn't it a moment of serendipity that Kelly is our liturgist today? Neither of us knew this when I called to discuss her faith journey with her."]

Now Kelly is planting seeds for others, her two nieces who don't have a church life. She arranged the logistics for them to come to our Vacation Bible School! It wasn't easy; they live in South Carolina, and on two mornings, they actually had to be driven from Burtonsville to Damascus so they could participate.

But the efforts were worth it. One day, after VBS, her 7-year-old niece Emma was outside drawing with sidewalk chalk. She drew a giant cross and wrote out "I love God very much. Love, Emma. " On the girls' way back to South Carolina, Kelly called them in the car, and could hear the VBS CD in the background.

You see, when we make children a priority in our hospitality, our own faith is renewed and strengthened. We get to experience the ease and the joy and the delight with which they accept the message that God loves them. As Kelly says, they lap it up!

Did you know that 40 percent of the children and youth who participated in VBS this summer aren't even DUMC church members? Their involvement points to another part of the "new hospitality" we must embrace.

This is the idea that, whoever someone is and wherever they come from, they "matter." Paul writes that we should show "honor" to each other. We demonstrate that honor when our actions show that people they matter to us like they matter to God.

Honoring people means meeting them where they are with the needs that they have. A recent example is the Faith Connections school supply drive which filled 341 backpacks with supplies for needy children in Damascus and Clarksburg.

Cathy Scarbrough, who planned the amazing VBS this summer, has been working on a new project for the fall, with very idea of "mattering" in mind. The Sunday School Mission Project will raise money to help with the famine in Africa. But Cathy wanted people to feel that their presence matters, too. She has worked to obtain sponsors will make special donations to the famine relief based on the number of people coming to Sunday School. She wants people to know that they themselves matter. The idea, she says, is to "Come to Sunday School and make a difference!"

I'm going to close with a story about a church I visited in this country – actually in Ocean City. A speaker during the service gave an update on the church's financial status. In fact, the church was in good shape financially due to the recent generous donations from some church members who had passed away. Instead of financial support, he said, "The most important thing you can do for our church is to bring a friend." Doesn't that advice hold true for all churches?

Friends, we who are here this morning represent the current generation of Christians. Like the Romans in Paul's time, it is our turn and it should be our joy to pass on the faith. Let the hospitality begin!