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Jeremiah 2:4-13

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1,7-14

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

In these words from today’s epistle to the Hebrews, it is interesting to note that the writer links mutual love, caring for each other in the church, with hospitality, caring for the outsider. And the writer speaks of mutual love and hospitality as natural occurrences.

I am sure there are many churches across our land who feel they need to hire a consultant to come in to lead a workshop on the complicated dynamics of being loving and hospitable. But hopefully there are some churches who are like the Nike commercial – they just do it.

In his book on Reaching Out Henri Nouwen says that “our world is full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self, and from their God.” So, following from his statement, a place of community, of hospitality, a place of companionship is a place to be valued in our world. Hospitality and mutual love create a space for the stranger. In that space the stranger becomes a guest, or perhaps even a friend.

But initial hospitality is only the initial step in establishing mutual love. For after the stranger has become a guest, or perhaps a friend, there hopefully is a reciprocating. And there is a hospitality to the one who was first hospitable. So, eventually it is possible that newer people are hospitable to people who have been here for decades. And it is in that reciprocating that mutual love occurs.

And so it is that at St. Paul's we are trying to create such a community. And we encourage mutual love.

One remarkable thing about this passage is its emphasis on intent. It would be easy to assume that any given church is naturally warm and inviting or cold and uninviting.

But the writer of Hebrews challenges that easy assumption. In today's epistle we are challenged to be intentional in our hospitality. We are challenged to continue in mutual love. To be intentional in continuing mutual love might be to greet someone at church whom you have not greeted in a long time. To be intentional might be greeting the one who was first hospitable to you. We are challenged to be intentional in hospitality. That might mean delaying your departure from church until you have approached and greeted someone.

The writer of Hebrews expands intentional hospitality even more by challenging us to walk a mile in the shoes of someone who is in prison or to walk a mile in the shoes of someone who is being tortured.

Now, does the writer mean that we are to seek out those in prison or those being tortured so we can show our hospitality? That is a possibility, and certainly an option. But the main point there is that we are sensitive to those who are outsiders, to those who are disenfranchised. For in initiating hospitality we pave the way for reciprocation for mutual love.

And yet, that challenge to be intentional is not resonant with a popular emphasis on loving when you feel like it. Following that line of thinking, if one does not feel loving, one does not love. One is not hospitable. One is not engaged in mutual love. If a church is not warm and loving, it is because the magic is not there. And yet in Hebrews we see that love is not just experienced, not just caught, not just enjoyed when it comes by. Love is built.

The warmth and hospitality in a church is not something that is mysteriously there or not. Mutual love is built. Mutual love is created by the steps we take and the hand we extend. At the same time it is before us to respect how people want to be welcomed, how people want to be loved, whether you are brand new, or been here for decades. Some people like to be cared for in small exchanges. “How are you doing today? I am fine.”

Some expect when you ask them how they are doing that you will stay there until they have told you how they are doing. So there is an art to it. And there is a respect to it.

But you know, there is one thing about building mutual love. Someone has to go first. Someone has to take the initiative. Someone has to take a risk. But, is it riskier to initiate mutual love or to reciprocate to someone who reached out first? Who knows?

For newer people, you should never underestimate the value of reciprocation and your own initiative. And you should not minimize your own initiative to those who have been here longer or to newcomers. For, in our world, whatever your social position, the person who genuinely and actively cares for another is not that common.

To not be hospitable, to not be involved in mutual love is to set up something in the church which I call parallelism where people come to the same place, and do the same things but never connect. I fear it is all too common in many churches. And in those communities I think mutual love is opportunity lost.

But if a whole church is engaged in taking risks and in reciprocating, something wonderful can happen. Something beautiful and loving can be built. The stranger becomes the guest. The guest becomes a friend. And that friend, in reciprocating, reaches out to the one who first reached out. Mutual love flourishes. So when a newcomer enters such a place, hospitality is in the air.

Warmth and welcome is obvious. Why? Because love is there, and because love is being built.

May it be so at St. Paul's. May our initial welcome be legendary in this county. May reciprocation be anticipated. May we know the pure joy of opening our hearts in initial and reciprocal hospitality. And let our mutual loving be respectful. Let mutual love continue, and let the good times roll. Amen.

