



Plymouth Congregational Church
2001 E. Grand River Avenue
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FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

HOSPITALITY

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Matthew 10: 40-42

The short passage from the Gospel of Matthew actually concludes a discourse in which – Jesus commissions the twelve

gives them a mission
tells of the difficulty of their mission
whom to fear
and then he describes his own mission.

Throughout the discourse, he refers to the end time – when he will no longer be among them. After a frightening description of their mission and the challenges, he then addresses the reward of following him. And finally, he comes to the major theme: hospitality.

When we hear that word we usually think of giving a party and serving as a gracious host or hostess. We open our home and invite others to come in. We clean the house, prepare elaborate foods, circulate among our guests to assure everyone is enjoying the occasion. Hospitality. Later, we receive thank you notes from those who enjoyed our hospitality.

Hospitality. Think of when guests come from out of town for a visit. We make the beds – fresh sheets and quilts. We lay out the best towels and prepare the bathroom and

bedroom with little treats – bath oil or gel, sweet smelling talc, even a mint on the pillow? We purchase our guests favorite foods or treat them to our favorite restaurants – all to offer a warm sense of hospitality.

Jesus told his disciples to go into the surrounding Jewish towns and villages of Palestine and preach the good news of love. He instructed them to simply find a worthy household in each town or village where they might find food and lodging. He told them that an “unworthy or inhospitable household does not keep the blessing of peace that the preachers pronounce upon it, and if they find an unworthy or inhospitable town, they should actually shake the towns dust from their feet and leave. The subtle message is that he town’s fate depends largely on its people’s hospitality. If they have rejected the messengers and their message, they will fare badly. They will miss out on the blessing of almighty God through Jesus.

Did you pick up on the subtlety of the message – the possibility is not even presented that the town’s people will accept the message of Christ but fail to show hospitality to the messengers. The two always go together.

We discover through the scripture that simple human kindness can have surprising results. To receive a dusty Jewish preacher with a new religious message becomes an act of good will toward the master who sent that preacher. More than that, receiving the preacher and his master turns out to be an act of devotion toward God! Hospitality becomes a holy act.

Within this passage we also begin to get the idea of reward. We in the church have actually tried to downplay this part of the passage, and I believe for good reason, because as soon as we begin to think of our good acts and hospitality as being a cause for reward rather than an act of devotion to God, then we lose our focus.

Think of it. Within the church this is especially true. How many of you volunteer for various tasks here at the church? Think of all the ministry that happens here in one week’s time – our lay ministers are visiting their assigned

care receivers, ministers are visiting at hospitals and nursing homes, our office volunteers are folding newsletters and mailing them. Some of you are volunteering at hospitals and hospice, at the library, the Y, the Christian Service organizations. Some of you put in almost a full days work at various projects and luncheons here at the church and for outreach into the community such as our Mobile Food Pantry service and the Aids Walk. Why do we do these things? Because it is the ministry of Christ – and we do it in Christ’s name. We reach out and do whatever we can to make life easier for others – that’s what Christ asked us to do in his name.

Now think for a moment how everything changes if we expect to be rewarded. If every time you volunteer you expect a public thank you or some show or gratitude – how is your act of love changed?

What happens if you feel that somehow the church owes you something for all the time you put in. Do you see how your act of hospitality is now tainted? Christ is speaking to the disciples but also to us in this Gospel about our receiving the same kind of reward as the disciples. If we receive the prophet just because he is Christ’s prophet, then we receive the prophet’s reward. To welcome a person just as a child of God is to earn an equal reward as though we are welcoming Christ himself. What is the reward?

Is it riches, elaborate or expensive gifts? Of course not. It is simply the blessing of God. To know that special feeling of the presence of God. To have the pure pleasure of developing a relationship with God through Christ just as surely as if we were welcoming God into our homes to spend the day or a week.

What gift must we offer? Nothing elaborate either. No. “Just a cup of cold water.” The little ones Jesus referred to were actually the disciples. These men were socially powerless. There was no reason for anyone to welcome them into their homes and feed them or help them clean themselves. Not rich or important – they were simply those who followed Christ, trusted in God alone and depended upon God’s people.

There are actually two themes here – hospitality and persecution.

They begin with the knowledge that not everyone will be hospitable. In fact, they're sure that those with kindness will be in the minority. Jesus spoke of turning them out "as sheep in the midst of wolves."

But then he commands them to the care of godly people who will welcome them as God's representatives. Coming directly after Jesus' harsh words about giving up one's family and one's life and subjecting themselves to deadly persecution for his sake, he then places them in the care of God's people- caring people who love God, accept Jesus' words and honor his messengers. This kind of love is rare. When you feel it you never forget it.

I served my first church for over six years, first as a student pastor and then after ordination for a number of years. We cared for each other deeply and when it was time to answer God's call to another church, I thought my heart would break from the pain of saying goodbye. Yes, pastor's do feel that pain.

As I was packing boxes of books and hanging robes and stoles in the packing container one afternoon, someone knocked on my office window. It had been an exhausting day meeting with people, saying goodbye, answering questions about why I was leaving and I lay my head on the desk and asked for peace. I opened the window and there stood my Dad and Mom. My Dad said, "I thought maybe you could use a friendly face about now." We had dinner together and I found more strength to prepare myself to leave. But on the day when the moving truck arrived, I felt myself with so many bittersweet feelings. I knew I must follow God's call, but the pain of leaving was also intense.

When the truck was loaded the driver came in to tell me he was ready to pull out. I locked the door and as I turned to walk to the car, there they was a crowd of those beloved people whom I had served and loved. The president of the congregation came forward and said, "We thought we would say goodbye once more and follow a tradition of my

country of New Zealand. We will walk behind you down the driveway out to the street. This will signify that we will always walk with you wherever you go.”

I cannot tell you what that simple gesture of hospitality meant to me and my family. To know that those dear friends intended to walk with us in spite of their own grief and challenges ahead was an act of utter grace and throughout every move I have made since, I have always felt their presence.

Today we share together in welcoming home our parents and children to Sunday School and a new children’s choir program, we welcome our new organist Darlene Ross, we welcome many who have been away for the summer months, and we welcome all who come to worship God with us and share in fellowship with our picnic following worship.

This afternoon we will welcome hundreds of people who come here as we host the “Requiem” that will be sung in memory of those who died ten years ago today and to honor all those who acted in such heroic ways during the months and years that have followed that terrible event.

In all these things, we walk the path down the driveway and out into the world to do the work of the Lord, to offer hospitality to all we meet. We do that not because of any reward promised, but simply as an act of utter devotion to God. That’s what we do – and we do it always in Christ’s name. Don’t we? Amen.