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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
“Radical Hospitality – The Courage for New Wineskins”
September 11, 2011
Matthew 9:9-17 <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=182445540>

At the top of the first page of the worship bulletin is a new Strategic Vision mission statement recently adopted by our Session:

As a diverse community of believers, we strive to follow God: the Creator who calls us, Jesus who teaches us, and the Spirit who empowers us. We show God’s unconditional love by providing a refuge for spiritual growth, ardently pursuing justice, and extending Christ’s radical hospitality to all.

Throughout this month, we will be exploring what it means to show Christ’s hospitality to all – a hospitality that can be characterized as radical.

Today’s gospel passage is a good example of what I mean. Jesus walked past Matthew, a despised tax collector, and said “Follow me,” extending hospitality to this man hated by Romans and Jews alike for his dishonorable profession. Later Jesus sat down at a meal surrounded by other tax collectors and people normally barred from proper society. When the hospitality police showed up and questioned Jesus’ choice of dinner companions, he did not bend to their biases but rather defended his radical, topsy-turvy definition of hospitality. He sent the Jewish scholars off to do some remedial study of their own scriptures, quoting the prophet Hosea who said, “Go and learn what it means when the Lord God says ‘I desire mercy, acts of compassion and justice and inclusion, and not just ritual deeds of sacrifice and piety designed to highlight one’s own righteousness.’ Christ’s expression of hospitality was radical because it turned on its head the Pharisee’s own flawed version of biased, prejudicial, disingenuous hospitality.

There’s a wonderful old legend associated with a deacon of the church in Rome back in the 3rd century AD. His name was Deacon Lawrence and he served as the financial officer for the Rome parish during a time when Emperor Valerian was persecuting and arresting Christian leaders. Church property was also being confiscated when Valerian called Lawrence before him and made him this bargain: He would spare his life and set him free if he brought to the Emperor all the wealth of the church. Lawrence asked for three days in order to comply with Valerian’s demands. He then went out and assembled the sick, aged, and poor; the widows and orphans of the congregation, and presented them to the Emperor saying, “These are the treasures of the Church.” The enraged Valerian ordered Lawrence executed for his audacity. Yet while Valerian has slipped beneath the horizon of history, the martyr Lawrence lives on with cathedrals dedicated to his memory still standing today.

Jesus' extension of hospitality to Matthew, the tax collector and outcast, was a symbolic act that modeled God's love for a world unaccustomed to seeing it. By this simple act, pulling in someone who'd been pushed to the margins, Jesus embodied mercy and justice so that the everyday structures of social, political, and religious life were shaken at their foundation. It was a living out of the words spoken in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats: "Whoever shows mercy to these, the least of my family, it is as if you are showing mercy to me" (Mt 25:40). It was a prefiguration of the message at the heart of Peter's vision in Acts 10: "What God has made clean you must not call unclean." It was a radical and inspiring hospitality.

So what is the next step? Should we go out into the streets and welcome a stranger to lunch today? That's possible. Or at the very least you can look at the people you pass on your way to lunch and sincerely try not to see them as strangers, as impossible choices ever to be your lunch companion. Is the next step for our church to fling open its doors so that people are welcomed in after the example of Christ? Yes, we can strive to do more of that, even as we already open our doors to many. The East Liberty community hopefully finds a welcome here as they enter for counseling, for 12-step groups, for times of quiet prayer in the sanctuary, for music lessons, and for volunteer gatherings of all types. Your pledges and financial support go a long way toward allowing this building to be a place of radical hospitality.

But real, Christ-like hospitality isn't simply a matter of being nice to someone in need. Radical hospitality asks why the man or woman or child was excluded in the first place. It asks whether we are building up structures that glorify God and honor our fellow beings, or simply erecting monuments to ourselves that obscure the light of God's love, and make things harder for all members of God's family. The places where we can focus our attention on showing radical hospitality today are readily available and close at hand. For example, we've spent well over a trillion dollars in our so-called "war on drugs" ever since it was first declared by President Nixon and later by President Reagan. Yet while 20 million Americans had experimented with illegal drugs in 1970, a low estimate from 2007 estimates that number has swollen to over 138 million, with the demand ever growing and the existing laws and policies doing nothing except make America the world leader in prison incarceration. We put our money into prisons instead of broad-based drug treatment programs. Isn't it time to radically re-think what we do?

Another example: Over the coming months, we will hear a lot about taxes, whether they are too high or too low. Last year, individuals like you and me contributed about \$900 billion in tax revenue, while corporations paid about \$190 billion. In theory, the top tax rate for business is 35%, one of the highest in the world. But in truth, thanks to tax breaks and loopholes and hiding profits in overseas subsidiaries, major corporations end up paying a much lower percentage, if any taxes at all. Business leaders would accept closing the loopholes if the overall tax code could be simplified and rates reduced, bringing the U.S. taxes more in line with European nations. Tax revenue would go up and the social costs of being a world leader would be more equitably shared. Isn't it time to tackle this issue and reform our financial priorities?

During the past week, the news media has been focused on today's anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It's true that the events of 9-11 brought forth tremendous responses of honor, bravery, and valor from ordinary men and women across this nation. But in reviewing the past decade, it is also true that 9-11 has left a legacy of military aggression and casualties of war here and abroad that cannot unequivocally be said to have made us any safer in the long run. It was said from this pulpit ten years ago and from other pulpits across America that we were quicker to follow the flag after 9-11 than to follow the cross. Military action as a first response will never bear the long-term results that honor God and love our neighbors as ourselves. It is simply pouring new wine into old wineskins of violence and bloodshed, and might makes right. All that comes of it is that the wineskins tear and break: the wounded come home, scarred by our lack of vision and our failure to risk a hospitality that is Christ-like and truly radical.

Do we have the courage to try new wineskins? Long ago Thomas Aquinas said "Courage is love that is ready to risk." That is a great definition of how we are to follow the cross of Christ today. Courage is love that is ready to risk. A few months before his assassination, Martin Luther King declared "I still have a dream that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized, and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda." Doing that would be entrusting ourselves to new wineskins in our political and governmental life today.

The hospitality of Christ was extended to Matthew. Jesus said "Follow me." Jesus walked with him and ate with him. And soon others gathered from the margins and shadows and sat down to break bread at one table. This radical hospitality was seen first by God, whose primordial vision called forth life from chaos and created us in God's own image and called us, collectively, "good." It was seen by Christ, who was in the beginning and all things came into being through him, but in the particular time and place of ancient Palestine, Christ saw the opportunity to live into this vision as he looked into the face of a tired man seated behind the customs desk by the side of the road. His decision to act on what he saw turned the world's order on its head, so that a vision of sacrificial love and justice has been set before all of us.

That same opportunity to do radical, deep hospitality is before us today. It is the way of courageous faith, in which love that is ready to risk is made manifest in the world. It is the new wineskins of Christ into which each day we pour new wine by doing new things. And as Christ has said, in this way "both are preserved." Both are preserved. We long to do what is right. We long to love and do what is true. We long to do what brings forth life in abundance and joy. That is why we need to follow the radical hospitality, risk-taking courage of the holy One, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

AMEN