



“Accept. Accepted. Accepting.”

Text: 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Radical Hospitality. The first practice of a fruitful congregation. However, before we think about radical hospitality given to others, I want us to first think about God’s radical hospitality to us.

Thinking about God’s radical hospitality toward us starts with, in the words of theologian Paul Tillich, “Accept that you are accepted.” Accept that you are accepted. I’m sure you’re sitting there thinking, “Well, of course I know that God accepts me.” But do you? You may know it with your mind, but do you know it with your heart? Robert Schnase says that the pivotal first element in our walk of faith - the practice of Hospitality - involves our YES to God’s love, a willingness to open our lives to God and invite God into our hearts.” And that opening of our lives and hearts to God involves our CAPACITY to RECEIVE grace, ACCEPT Christ’s love, and make room for God in our lives.

“We are fundamentally the recipients of a promise. We don’t have to give anything; only to receive what is given. Our only and singular task is to accept what is given. Our only and singular task is to accept that we are accepted.”

On the surface, this looks like it should be simple, but if we are honest with ourselves we know it is not. We are all imperfect people, raised by imperfect people, interacting with imperfect people, living in an imperfect society; and all that can leave in its wake feelings of guilt or resentment, insecurities, underlying anger or sadness, and all these negative feelings that linger within grows in the recesses of a person’s soul. Schnase goes on to say “But the good news is that it is GRACE helps us face the truth about ourselves, to EMBRACE it rather than run from it; and by embracing this truth and offering it to God, we discover that God KNOWS the truth about us and STILL LOVES us, and that God will shape us from this day forward anew. Can we accept that we are accepted?”

“Our WORTH is grounded in God’s grace. When we finally get it, and open our hearts to the truth of God’s love for us, we begin to receive glimpses of a peace that the world cannot give or take away, an inner assurance about our ultimate worth in God’s eyes that surpasses understanding...to open our lives to grace, to receive, and to say YES. Radical Hospitality begins by welcoming God in fully; by being willing to be VULNERABLE to God and turning that brokenness within over to God.”

For the longest time I didn’t want to go into parish ministry. I loved hospital and hospice work for many reasons, but the main two were these: First, I found I was more patient with people’s craziness, excusing their behavior to their illness, than I was with people in the church who were supposed to be “normal” and were acting crazy. By crazy I mean entitled, demanding, self-absorbed, complaining. You get the idea. Yes, we all have moments of crazy, but God loves us even in those moments that we are less than the ideal child of God that we should be. The second reason I loved my work with the sick and dying was because I found that people often would face their lives, their brokenness, with much more honesty and would be seeking God more earnestly so that they could die in peace. I found it humbling and a privilege to be invited into someone’s life, into the deep recesses of their heart, to see their wounds and their brokenness and to help them find peace.

Over the years, as I’ve faced my brokenness and leaned into God’s grace, I found I grew in patience and love for the crazy found in the “normal and healthy,” and that has made all the difference in my work as a pastor. And that is why it is so important for us to accept that we are accepted by God. By accepting that I am accepted as I am doesn’t mean that I don’t still try to improve myself, but it means understanding that I don’t do it alone. I do it with God, but I should also be doing it within the context of a Christian community.

Radical hospitality begins first between each of us and God; accepting God’s love for us and our accepting God and not trying to hide parts of ourselves from God. We welcome God in as fully as God welcomes us. The second step of Radical Hospitality is doing the same for one another. What do you know about your neighbor in the pew in front of you or behind you? You may know their name, but do you know their joys, their fears, their worries? Do you know if they have a strong support system or do they lie awake at night feeling lonely and alone? How vulnerable do you feel you can be with the people in this room? Can you trust them with your inner most thoughts and feelings, with your questions about God, with your needs? Do you feel that this is a safe place to be vulnerable or do you fear you would not be respected the same or not seen in the same light? And what is the church for, if not to be a safe haven for people who need love, who need grace, who may need mercy, who need family and connection?

We have a problem in our society. And that is there is a lack of desire to get to know the other person, even at church. We say hi, may learn their name, but going for a real, meaningful relationship is not something that most people are interested in. We have our friends, our patterns, and are comfortable in them. But Radical Hospitality means inviting the other person into a meaningful relationship with you and with the church. It means welcoming the other, whomever that person may be. It means going deeper than a superficial greeting on a Sunday morning.

I started this sermon with the idea of accepting that God loves us as we are right now for two reasons. First, it is important for our ability to love both God and others when we are able to see our brokenness and can accept that God loves us despite our faults and foibles. Second, because we need a healthy love for ourselves to be able to have a healthy love for others. The second greatest command is love your neighbor as yourself. And when we can understand and embrace that God loves each of us just as we are, then we can embrace the call that comes to us to love others as ourselves. God does not put conditions upon us to love us and we shouldn't be doing that to others.

In one church in New Jersey, I worked as the Interim Associate Pastor. One responsibility was to teach the confirmation class. I had four other adults assisting. We had over twenty youth in that class. One adult, Joy, had befriended a girl in the community, Kristen. Kristin came from a single parent household with a lot of dysfunction. This girl had begun to attend youth group and confirmation class. There was another girl in the class, Susan, whose parents had been going to this church for twenty years or more. Susan had social anxiety and learning disabilities. The mother came to us and told us that Kristin bullied Susan at school. We told her we would watch out for that and would make sure that Susan wasn't bullied. We never saw Kristen act inappropriately with Susan and yet Susan's anxiety was apparently high. One day I got a call from an Elder complaining about Kristen being in the class. I assured him that Susan was safe in the class. However, that wasn't good enough for this Elder, who was a friend of Susan's parents. He escalated his complaining until he finally said that I should tutor her. A bit confused, I asked, "You want me to tutor Susan?" "No," he shouted at me, "Tutor the other girl. Why should one of OUR kids have to feel uncomfortable at HER OWN church?" Needless to say, I was totally taken aback by his words. Kristen, who struggled in a chaotic home life, who was desperate for love, who'd found some semblance of acceptance and stability through her relationship with Joy and this church, and he wanted me to destroy all that by telling her she had to be tutored, just because another girl who had her own issues had anxiety. This man was considering only one person's needs and not the needs of another broken young person. Reject Kristin. Cast her out. She's not one of us.

Who is the church for if not for the Kristens of the world, for that little five year old boy and his angry and sad mother, and for Susan with her anxiety and learning disabilities? Radical hospitality. God showed us radical hospitality through the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ. For God so loved the world that God gave us God's only Son. Jesus, who showed us God's love in the flesh, who showed us how to love the sinner and the outcast, and even the rich young ruler. Jesus even showed love and compassion to those who were to crucify him by asking God to forgive them. Radical love. Radical Hospitality. We love because God first loved us.

As I mentioned last week, action, good deeds come out of our faith; they come forth from our love of God. That is a form of worship, an acting out of one's faith. We are called to love one another and to care for one another.

As our society became more technology driven, relationships began to break down. This started before the pandemic but, of course, greatly increased during the pandemic. The lack of face to face contact, the lack of meaningful conversation. With that came an increase in people feeling lonely; not just alone, but lonely. More people struggling on every level. This is this church's opportunity to ask: What does it mean for us to offer Radical Hospitality to each other and to our neighbors within the community? Do we hear God's call to love others as God first loved us? Can we care enough for others to look beyond their brokenness and see them as God sees them; to see them as beloved children of God?

I attended a webinar on the post-pandemic church. The presenter said, "If your church ceased to exist today, would the community care? Would they even notice?" Our challenge is to become so relevant in our love and care for our neighbor that Evansville would notice and grieve if this church ceased to exist. Our challenge is to figure out how to best do that. There are so many, I'm sure, even in the homes around us, who are lonely and alone, angry, sad, anxious. In need of love. In need of radical hospitality. In need of God and God's family. We love, because God first loved us. Amen.



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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