

Hospitable Disciples: Matthew 9:9-13

Norwalk Christian Church, Disciples Together, Season After Pentecost, Proper

I made a mistake while on our trip last week. The lack of sleep and the hours in an un-air-conditioned bus must've gotten to me. I was reading the latest post from the Norwalk, Iowa, Facebook group, and I commented. I know, I know. I should've known better. What was I thinking, right?

The post was about the old Norwalk Warriors mascot, the face of a Native American man with stereotypical First People's warrior wear. I'm of the opinion that such images, while created I'm sure for harmless reasons should not be used, as they promote racial stereotypes. It's offensive to many people, so why would we want to do this, especially after committing what we believed was God-sanctioned genocide, the attempted wiping out of an entire people. After such history, kindness towards the ancestors of native peoples is, literally, the least we could do. That's what I think.

So, I made a mistake. After reading a thread filled with racist and offensive language, diatribes against Political Correctness and how "people just shouldn't get so offended over things," I thought, hey, perhaps it would be good if SOMEONE said, You know, I think it's good to be kind to others. So, I commented, simply, "I am glad Norwalk changed their logo." Period. The end.

A *minute* later, some fellow Norwalkian whom I've probably eaten with at Maid Rite or shopped with at Scott's, replied to my comment by insulting me with racial and homophobic slurs. (He's since deleted his comment.)

A few weeks ago in the same Norwalk, Iowa, Facebook group, they were debating the flag of the confederacy that our neighbor to the north flies along our highway. Some of the things that were written...horribly, unkind, insensitive and incredibly racist comments. A friend of many in our youth group, a young African-American woman who just graduated from Norwalk High School, boldly and level-headedly shared her perspective on why this flag was offensive, and her fellow neighbors responded with their hateful, racist slurs.

What is it with Facebook that brings out our worse? The lack of personal connection with those you are talking with seems to give permission to say the most horrible things. We cry, "freedom of speech", and forget our obligation to be kind to our neighbor. And it leaves me wondering, "Why is kindness so unpopular these days?"

Of course, if you think the Norwalk, Iowa, Facebook page can get rough, Can you imagine the post in the Capernaum, Israel, Facebook Group? Someone posts, "I just saw a Rabbi eating dinner at Matthew the Tax Collector's house! What has this world come to?!"

The comments: “Oh my goodness, doesn’t that Rabbi know if he eats with someone like that he becomes contaminated like them?”

“Who could eat with such trash like that? I’d choke on my food!”

“That Matthew is a Big Government, Roman liar and a cheat! Someone should feed him poison.”

“Unclean! Unclean!”

And to post after post, Jesus’ comment remains the same: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Over the summer we have been looking at the Weird and Wonderful practices of the church in our Disciples Together series, and the practice of Hospitality is high up on the weird list. In our culture today, hospitality is an industry: Custodians, bellhops, servers and flight attendants. We pay people to be hospitable, but we do not strive for such a thing in our lives. Personal freedom! Argument winning! That’s what we’re after.

But Christian hospitality is not an industry, it’s a way of life modeled after Jesus.

In Jesus’ culture, strict social norms said you couldn’t eat or associate with someone who was unclean, and people who were non-Jews, Gentiles, were the most unclean of all. Matthew, himself, was a Jew, yet he worked for the Romans, the ones imprisoning his people. He was unclean by association, and to eat with him made Jesus unclean.

Yet Jesus didn’t care. He showed hospitality to Matthew by seeking out Matthew, and then accepting Matthew’s hospitality in Matthew’s house, eating his food at his table.

The religious leaders were offended at Jesus! Everything Jesus was doing was against religious tradition, and they took to the streets and the Facebook groups to criticize all that Jesus was doing.

And Jesus’ response was simple: “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” We need to learn what this means.

My challenge in this sermon is likewise simple, and that’s good, because after a week on the road, I’m tired. I need simple. You can say the challenge in multiple ways: be hospitable, Love your neighbor as yourself, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

But at the end of the day, it all can be summed up in two, simple words, “Be Kind.” That’s what hospitality is. Kindness. Welcoming others. Sharing food, sharing life. Opening the door for someone. Listening to someone’s story. Showing empathy—trying

to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Not insisting on your own way, but giving up your rights for the sake of the other. Be kind.

And our world needs kindness! Our world needs Hospitable Disciples, the people of God modeling for our community what it means to be kind, to welcome people, even those we disagree with.

What would happen if, in Norwalk, we were known as the church that shows hospitality? That when you walk into our church building, there was always someone at the door—both services—to welcome you, show you the way, hand you a bulletin, and learn your name. (And if you'd like to volunteer to do that, let me know!)

But hospitality goes beyond just welcoming visitors. It's about building a community of welcome and love, where we don't gripe about things around the church when they don't go our way, nor do we listen to other people who want to gripe. Instead, we lovingly put up with one another, realizing that life together is messy, sometimes literally, by the way—you should've seen the church bus after our trip! We share life, and that means we can't always get our own way. But we must, always, strive to forgive and show kindness.

But notice in our Gospel story today, Jesus doesn't sit around in church and wait for Matthew to come to him. He goes out, and finds Matthew, and calls him to "Follow me." And where does Jesus lead him? Right back to Matthew's own house, where Matthew is able to show kindness and hospitality to Jesus and his Disciples.

Hospitality is not just showing kindness to those who enter our house, it's going out, to where people are, taking God's loving-kindness to them, and accepting their offer of hospitality to you.

So I have two challenges for you today:

First, look around this place. See who you need to be kind to, who you need to show the welcome of God to. Then go and do it. Be intentional about building one another up, not tearing each other down.

And then, Second, I challenge you to take God's kindness out into Norwalk and beyond on a Hospitality Campaign. I'm not kidding, I want us to do this. Go around the community, seeking out kind acts to do for your neighbors.

Maybe we can start on the Norwalk Facebook Group. When someone posts something that's a gripe or, worse, an offensive post or comment, counter it by saying something kind. Post positive things about our community and our neighbors, and refuse to fall into the trap of using Facebook as a place to vent publicly your frustrations with your family, friends and neighbors. Be positive and kind; model Christ—even on Facebook.

But this is more than Facebook. Everywhere you go, take the Hospitality of Christ with you. When you're in Scott's or Fareway, say hello to the people you don't know (and the people you do know, too). Be kind to employees. Surprise someone by paying for the meal of the people behind you in the Taco John's line. Don't get impatient at the traffic light or when that person in front of you doesn't turn when they're supposed to. Write a note to someone who needs encouragement. Visit someone you know is hurting. Use your imagination and come up with ways to share Jesus' hospitality with others.

Yes, you're free to do and say whatever you like while offending everyone in the process...but if you're a Disciple of Jesus, you seek out a different way. Teach us, Jesus, what this means: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

You can't be *too* kind. You can't be *too* hospitable. Kindness is always the best choice, the best response.

Ultimately, it's not our worship or sacrifices given to God that Jesus is concerned about, but how we show mercy to our family and our church family, to our neighbors and to strangers, on Facebook and in real life--mercy. Kindness. Hospitality. Extending the welcome of Christ to everyone.

And our community desperately needs Disciples who are creating such a community, where all are welcome and loved just as they are.