

SERMON: “Being Fruitful: Practicing Radical Hospitality.”

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., October 17, 2010, St. James Presbyterian Church

I’m glad that you are here and that you choose to join your voice and prayers with ours this morning: you’ve picked a good Sunday – the first Sunday of our new series on fruitful living entitled “Being Fruitful” – we hope that you will find this series helpful; it is meant to be both challenging and encouraging so that you might experience growth in your spiritual life. Thank you for being here: now let’s get started. And there’s no better place to do that than you ask you right up front a question that you don’t normally hear in respectful Presbyterian conversation; have you accepted that you are accepted by God? Or to put it more theologically; can you accept that God loves you and that through that love – something that you didn’t have to labour for, earn, work on but was freely given – that act of grace – something extended to you despite your faults and failings – has brought about your salvation?

Quoting Paul Tillich – one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th century – Robert Schnase, in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* – which this series is based on, writes about this fundamental yet elusive and often overlooked reality; “*we cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transform by [God’s] grace.*” Schnase then states that “*the pivotal first element in our walk of faith – the practice of Radical Hospitality – involves our saying “yes” to God’s love for us, a willingness to open our lives to God and invite God into our hearts.*” He goes on to say that more than anything else our acceptance of God’s grace, “*our capacity to receive grace, accept Christ’s love, and [to] make room for God in our lives,*” is the essential first step from which a life of faith grows. And it’s true. No matter what we do or say as a people who claim to live a life of faith – who claim by proof of our actions and practice to be fruitful Christians – if we haven’t taken the crucial first step of accepting God – and God’s grace – into our lives then everything – the life we have lived and the faith we have professed – is false. I know it sounds harsh but there’s no getting around it: but the first step toward becoming the new creation – to become the person God wants us to be begins when we open the door and allow God into our hearts – it begins when we open ourselves up to God’s unconditional love.

Now what does this have to do with hospitality – after all, doesn’t hospitality mean something we show toward others? – and on the surface it is, but the hospitality we show – extend – to those we welcome at the doors of our lives (to our sanctuary and community of faith – or into our homes when you host a party) only goes so far: we let them in but only into the “public” places in our lives: we never usher them into our private places! Radical Hospitality – the hospitality that we’re talking about, the hospitality that leads to life transformation – involves our not only letting God into those places, but it also requires us to go deeper: to be receptive not only God’s presence but also to the life changing work that God will begin in our lives once we do. The personal practice of radical hospitality begins with a receiving, accepting attitude toward the God

who stands at the door knocking, and a readiness to being open to and intentionally willing to make room for God in our lives. The journey to becoming what God created, calls, and commissions us to be begins here. The journey to living a more fruitful life begins only when God becomes a known – and live-changing – reality that we must first welcome and receive. And, while this ‘welcoming in’ of God requires of us a radical – extraordinary – hospitality, it also calls for a humility – a breaking down, a submission – that finally brings down the walls that divide and separate us from God and one another.

But, as I can tell you from experience, this is one of the hardest things to do. We all wrestle – in one way or form or another – with whether we’re worthy enough; whether we’re good enough, or if we are even fully accepted by God as we are. This doubt leads to our questioning the confidence of our faith and results in our either falling away from God in shame or trying – out of guilt – to prove, earn, justify, or validate ourselves before God and our neighbours – but mostly to ourselves. I can tell you that neither path works: that the only way to break the cycle is to accept and embrace the fact that – despite our fears – God knows all about us (what we’ve done and not done) and – and – still loves us. This is grace – grace beyond our deserving, grace beyond all merit, grace freely given: grace that, when we fully absorb its full meaning in, and consequence for our lives, causes us to rethink the direction and pace of our lives, that compels us to correct and alter – to change – the course of our lives, and to want to live our life differently – to live it more fully, more fruitfully. And there’s no better depiction of this grace than the Luke reading we just heard.

Jesus tells three stories in quick succession in Luke 15 that speak to our disconnection from God’s searching grace – remember, God is standing at our door knocking/seeking, searching/waiting for us. The first is about distraction – like sheep we distractedly nibble our way to being lost – mindlessly moving, head down, from one thing to the next until we’ve gone astray as Isaiah prophesied. The second is about another form of distraction that causes us to lose sight of that which is most precious to us – the woman loses a coin in her own home because she’s unable to find it for the clutter/corruption in her life – until she cleans up. And the third – which we just heard – deals with wilful rebellion. The prodigal (which means reckless – think thoughtless – and wasteful as in he squandered – without thinking about the consequences – his inheritance) runs away from his father’s protection and suffers as a result of his wilful impulses: that is until (and this is one of my favourite lines/phrases in the entire Bible) “*he came to himself*” and opened himself up to the idea of accepting his father’s/God’s grace and he begins his journey “home.” The God we see revealed in Jesus’ parable is not some dispassionate, passive God who keeps His distance, no, He’s an active God of grace who searches, embraces, and still waits for us: He is a God who – as Paul wrote – “*proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (Rom 15:8)

In closing I want to ask; what does the attitude of the sons to the father’s/God’s offer of grace reveal about us? Did you note that the ‘title’ given to this parable isn’t “*The*

parable of the prodigal son” it’s actually “*The parable of the prodigal and his brother.*” And this is where Jesus’ lesson on Radical Hospitality hits home: we can either practice radical hospitality the right way as demonstrated by the lost, now found son who has opened himself up to the father’s grace by admitting to his father – and to himself – his faults/sins, or the wrong way as shown by the elder brother who is depicted as standing obstinately outside the house looking in with his arms crossed refusing to accept his father’s invitation of grace to him. Which one welcomes God’s ‘welcome’? Which one accepts God’s acceptance? Which one do you think has a greater chance of being fruitful? Which one are you? The first step toward fruitful living is your saying “yes” to God’s amazing, crazy, unconditional love toward you. Friends, God’s love changes everything – but you must open yourself/the door to God’s grace – a gift that will, in turn ignite a passionate desire to love God in return which becomes our worship.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts enable us to open ourselves up to God as we seek to live fruitful lives. Amen