

The Zone of Radical Hospitality

Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 15:1-7

Church of the Resurrection

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If you head north on I35W out of Minneapolis, take Exit 220, and then go five miles on County Road 6, you'll hit the farm home of Kay and Willis Finifrock. It is one of the most welcoming places on planet earth. For eight years I had the privilege of being Kay and Willis' pastor in Barnum, Minnesota, population 460. Willis, a retired farmer and furnace repairman, and Kay, homemaker, church leader and fabulous cook, have created a zone of radical hospitality for the weary, lonely pilgrims of life who need a refuge. I will never forget the farm dinners with roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, biscuits and at least three kinds of homemade pies. I could go back to Barnum, Minnesota anytime and Kay and Willis would welcome me with open arms.

Now let me tell you about another zone of radical hospitality. It's the home of Leon and Nancy Finifrock, also in Barnum, Minnesota. In their career as foster parents, Leon and Nancy took in over 100 teenage boys, mostly boys that no one wanted—not even the state of Minnesota. They were boys that Nancy claimed had sadly become “the rejects of our society's dysfunction.” In their home on 40 acres of land they had also created a zone of radical hospitality. For eight years, Leon and Nancy would welcome my entire family with their entire family—usually including 6-8 teenage boys—around their dinner table for a huge Sunday afternoon brunch and then football game.

It's tempting to think that what Willis and Kay and then what Nancy and Leon did was something unusual or unique. But for Christians it's not supposed to be unique. It's just what the Church does. We create a zone of radical hospitality. It's what the Church *is*—we are a Zone of Radical Hospitality. Or to put it another way: the Church embodies the welcome of Jesus for life's weary pilgrims.

Jesus—the Ultimate Zone of Hospitality

All of this radical hospitality begins with Jesus. Look with me at our Gospel reading for this morning—a simple but beautiful passage from Matthew 11:28-30. Notice Jesus' simple, open-armed, huge-hearted welcome that begins this passage in verse 28—“Come to me.” Have you ever been on a long road trip and you realize you're tired and hungry and smelly. You just want a place to rest, a place that feels like home. This passage is like that in the spiritual realm. Jesus' simple words—“Come to me”—are like a huge neon sign along the highway of life for travelers who aren't even sure what they're looking for. A huge sign that says: You are welcome here. You are loved here. Come, weary travelers. Come to your true home. Come and rest. Come and be embraced by the God who was out looking for you before you even thought of him. Jesus is the ultimate zone of radical hospitality.

Then notice the next phrase in verse 28: “*all* who labor and are heavy-laden.” Who can come? Did Jesus say that only those who are worthy can come? The righteous? Those with an impressive spiritual resume? Those who qualify? Those who come from good families? Those who have never gotten off-track in life? No, Jesus gave us only one qualification—you just have to be tired. Tired of trying to measure up. Tired of justifying yourself. Tired of living as a broken person in a fallen world. As Jesus said elsewhere, the one requirement to get into God’s kingdom is that you have to know you need a doctor and that Jesus is that doctor (Matthew 9:9-11).

If you have that one requirement, Jesus says, “You can come to me.” Of course you also need to believe that Jesus offers a better way, a richer way, a more life-giving way. It may not be an easier way. As a matter of fact, at times it will be a harder way. But it’s easier and richer than what I’ve tried to do for much of my life—living my way, carrying my own burdens, making my own plans, saving my own soul. So Jesus says, “Come to me.”

But notice one more thing. Jesus tells us that coming to him means coming under his loving lordship and leadership. Notice verse 29—“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” That’s a call to be his disciple, to learn life from him. A yoke was the wooden thing that they put on cattle. Jesus says learn from me.

Now in case this frightens you or turns you off, keep in mind that you are *someone’s* disciple. You are not your own man or woman. No one is. As Bob Dylan has sung, “You gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil, it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” You have learned life from your parents, your siblings, or your coworkers. You are learning life from society all around you. We all know how to do that. So now in this passage Jesus says, “Learn how to do life, how to live life from me. Let me be your ultimate source, your ultimate guide for how to do life because he offers a yoke that leads to true rest.

And then notice the glorious promise Jesus gives: “You will find rest for your souls.” You will find true rest, rest that the world cannot give. Rest that success and achievement and even the best things of this life cannot give you.

Maybe today, this morning, you will say to Jesus, “I hear you, Jesus. I hear you say, ‘Come to me all who are heavy-laden.’ That’s me. I’m tired of my yoke. I want to come under your yoke. I want to learn life from you.”

The Church—a Zone of Hospitality for Jesus

So Jesus is the ultimate Zone of Hospitality who calls us, the Church, to embody his hospitality on earth. Notice our second reading—Romans 15:7. Paul summarizes his argument by saying, “Therefore welcome one another as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Look at what Jesus did and said. Look at who Jesus is. He is the Zone of Hospitality. Now you, the Church, the people who follow Jesus, you embody the radical

hospitality. You create a zone of hospitality so the world can see and hear and touch and feel and be embraced by the hospitality of Jesus.

This past Thanksgiving a story went viral about a grandmother named Wanda Dench who texted a number that had originally belonged to her grandson's cell phone. Wanda was trying to invite her grandson over for a Thanksgiving meal. Instead of her grandson, the text went to 17 year-old Jamal Hinton. Jamal and Wanda figured out the mistake, but then Jamal asked if it was possible to "still get a plate" at Grandma Wanda's Thanksgiving Day bash. Wanda Dench responded, "Of course you can. That's what grandmas do." When asked about the encounter after Thanksgiving, Jamal said, "I'm thankful ... she welcomed me into her house, so that shows me how great of a person she is." If the church is being the Church, Christians are constantly saying things like Wanda Dench—"Of course you are welcome here. Of course I'll be your friend. That's what Christians do."

Who We Welcome in Jesus' Name

Now I said that this was a sermon about the Sanctity of Life. And you may be thinking: he hasn't said anything about being pro-life or about abortion or about politics. No, I haven't. Because the best way to be pro-life is to be the Church. And the Church follows Jesus. And one way we follow Jesus is to create a zone of radical hospitality that points back to him. Jesus says "Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden" and we say "Come to him all who labor and are heavy-laden." Now there are many other ways to be pro-life and some of them are very important, but our first priority, our unique contribution to this troubling issue, our most political act is simply this: Be the Church by creating a zone of radical hospitality in Jesus' name.

So what does that look like when we talk about being pro-life? Who do we welcome? Who gets invited into our Zone of hospitality?

We welcome people. Period.

Period. It begins with this: we're not choosy about who we welcome. After all, God wasn't very choosy—look, he chose me. He chose you. We weren't exactly perfect examples of spiritual maturity.

Sometimes pro-life people have been accused of just being pro-fetus, that we don't care about babies after they're born. I think that's horribly unfair and wildly inaccurate. But if there is any shred of truth in it, let us repent. Let us say loud and clear that this is absolutely unacceptable and anti-Christian, anti-Jesus, anti what the Church has tried to teach and demonstrate for 2,000 years.

Pope John II put it this way: "The protection and defense of the human person—every person and the whole person, especially those who are vulnerable and most helpless: that is the task [the Church], in the name of Jesus Christ, cannot and will not forsake." I love that. It's so clear and passionate. The protection and defense of the human person

includes the unborn, the poor, the forgotten, the troubled, the incarcerated, the mentally ill, and refugees. That's something worth living for and even worth dying for.

We welcome children—born and unborn.

That's just something the church has done for over 2,000 years. If you go back to the early documents of the Church you find that it's never been debated; it's never been an option. Abortion was wrong. It was the taking of a human life. It was a sin. It's weird because when the Church was young, children—unborn and born children— were valued less than cattle. Fathers had the legal right to dispose of children if they were imperfect— either the wrong gender (girls) or the child had a disability. The children were then “exposed”—the term that was used for leaving them on the outskirts of town so they could die or be eaten by wild dogs or taken by human traffickers.

Christians resisted this practice. Instead, they created a Jesus-like zone of radical hospitality. As one church father said, “The unborn child is the object of God's care.” Christians took these unwanted children, these non-persons, and they made them neighbors and even family members.

That's just what we do. That's why we go to things like the March for Life. It's one way to say that unborn children are our neighbors. That's why I'm thankful for our Replanted ministry and our Replanted families who have adopted or who are providing foster care. These families are doing the same thing that Christians have been doing for 2,000 years. It's just the Church being the Church, creating a zone of hospitality for born and unborn children that

We also welcome expectant mothers and fathers.

There's a pro-life writer named Frederica Mathewes-Green who wrote a book called *Real Choices*. She was trying to find out why women chose abortion rather than giving birth. Here's what she wrote:

Over and over again, women told me, “I had my abortion was because of a relationship.” Most of the time it was the father of the child who was pressuring her to have an abortion; in other cases, it was her parents. In 88% of the cases, the woman had had the abortion because someone she loved told her she should. When I asked, “What could anyone have done to help you have the baby,” Over and over women told me, “I would have had the baby if there had been somebody to stand by me.” They weren't asking for a lot; they weren't asking for housing and jobs and a handout. They were just asking for a friend.

I read that and it cut like a sword into my heart. Now the good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. The Church can create systems and networks and a culture that reaches out to both mothers and fathers of unborn children. We can be there for both of them. A few years ago a couple of women in our church signed up for what's called a CareNet Connection—a process for being that friend to a pregnant mom in need. So the

women in our church got matched with a young pregnant woman named Danielle. They didn't just walk with Danielle through her pregnancy. They gave a huge baby shower when Danielle's second daughter was born. They spent time with her both of her daughters. They helped her navigate the challenges of single parenting. They invited her to church. They helped Danielle find work and childcare and diapers and formula. And even after Danielle moved out of the state these women have still kept in touch with her. One of these Rez women told me, "Danielle seems to be doing well and its obvious that she adores her little girls! It was a blessing for me to get to know her and be a little part of her life for a while."

Again, that's not supposed to be amazing; it's just the Church being the Church.

We welcome women and men who have participated in an abortion.

There was a recent study that revealed some really sad statistics. Only about one third of women who have had an abortion consider church a safe place to discuss it. More than half of churchgoers who have had an abortion say no one at church knows it.

My friend Nancy Kruezer, who had an abortion and gave me permission to share her story, told me this week, "Those who have had an abortion may be thinking, 'It's wonderful the church is welcoming me, but they are perfect Christians and I am a wretched sinner who has committed the worst possible sin of all. I am more comfortable sitting here with my secret.'" But Nancy also said, "When I confessed my abortion to God and others, I came to understand that Jesus had truly come for me—not for the perfect or the righteous, but he had come for me, the sinner, the wounded."

By the way, if you have had an abortion or if you have lost a child through miscarriage, we invite you to come to our Infant Loss Memorial Service on Sunday evening January 29th. You do not have to be alone. We belong to a community of people who will love and embrace us at our very worst and our very best.

The beautiful invitation

So, my friends, there is a beautiful invitation awaiting all of us this morning. Do you see who Jesus is? He is the One who keeps saying, "Come to me all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." He is the Ultimate Zone of Radical Hospitality. Do you need his welcome today? Do you need to hear his words? Do you want to include yourself in the "All" that Jesus invites to himself? Then come. Come today. Come to Jesus. Do not delay. Do not try get yourself ready or better. Tell him you want to come now.

And when he calls us to himself, when he makes himself a church, we become a Zone of Hospitality. There is power in simple acts of hospitality. It can start small—like starting to notice new people, starting to invite people over for dinner or out for coffee. You could come to Alpha or invite a friend to Alpha.

But more than anything, I sense that the Lord Jesus is inviting us to hunger and thirst to become a zone of radical hospitality. There is much beyond our control, but we can control this. We can decide if we want to be a zone of radical hospitality. Strange and wonderful things happen when we practice hospitality, loving people in Jesus, bringing people to Jesus.

This past week I called my friends the Finifrocks. They're still doing their crazy Jesus stuff. Leon told me the story of a woman in their small town who was basically an atheist, hostile to church and the gospel. When her husband committed suicide the church embraced her. Someone invited her to church and she finally came. And then they loved her. She kept coming. Finally, she accepted Jesus into her own life. And then on New Years Day—just a few weeks ago—she married a man in the church who also lost his wife to suicide.

Guys like Leon and Willis Finifrock are tough men with tender hearts. So as usual, Leon started choking up when he told me this story. In one sense, it's an amazing story. It's a story worth a party in heaven and on earth. But in another sense, it's not unique. It's just the Church being the Church. So Church of Jesus Christ, let's be the Church. Let's just be the Church. Then let's watch God do wonderful things—because beautiful things happen in the name and power of Jesus when the Church is being the Church.