

“TOØ MESSY / Unit 3: Monster Christians
Sermon 3: “Hospitality”
November 22, 2015

I want to start out this morning by reading for you a story, a parable written by a Northern Irish Christian named Peter Rollins.

Once upon a time in the center of a once-great city there stood a magnificent cathedral that was cared for by a kindly old priest who spent his days praying and caring for the poor. As a result of the priest’s tireless work, the cathedral was known throughout the land as a true sanctuary. The priest welcomed all who came to his door and gave completely without prejudice or restraint. Each stranger was, to the priest, a neighbor in need and thus the incoming of Christ. His hospitality was famous and his heart was known to be pure. No one could steal from this old man, for he considered no possession his own, and while thieves sometimes left that place with items pillaged from the sanctuary, the priest never grew concerned: he had given everything to God and knew that these people needed such items more than the church did.

Early one evening in the middle of winter, while the priest was praying before the cross, there was a loud and ominous knock on the cathedral door. The priest quickly got to his feet and went to the entrance. He knew it was a terrible night and reasoned that his visitor might be in need of shelter. Upon opening the door he was surprised to find a terrifying demon towering over him with large dead eyes and rotting flesh. “Old man,” the demon hissed, “I have traveled many miles to seek your shelter. Will you welcome me in?” Without hesitation, the priest bid this hideous demon welcome and beckoned him into the church.

The evil demon stooped down and stepped across the threshold, spitting venom onto the tiled floor as he went. In full view of the priest, the demon proceeded to tear down the various icons that adorned the walls and rip the fine linens that hung around the sanctuary, while screaming blasphemy and curses. During this time the priest knelt silently on the floor and continued in his devotions until it was time for him to retire for the night.

“Old man,” cried the demon, “where are you going now?” “I am returning home to rest, for it has been a long day,” replied the kindly priest. “May I come with you?” spat the demon. “I too am tired and in need of a place to lay my head.” “Why, of course,” replied the priest. “Come, and I will prepare a meal.” On returning to his house, the priest prepared some food while the evil demon mocked the priest and broke the various religious artifacts that adorned his humble dwelling.

The demon then ate the meal that was provided and afterward turned his attention to the priest, “Old man, you welcomed me first into your church and then into your house. I have one more request for you: will you now welcome me into your heart?” “Why, of course,” said the priest, “what I have is yours and what I am is yours.” This heartfelt response brought the demon to a standstill, for by giving everything the priest had retained the very thing that the demon sought to take. For the demon was unable to rob him of his kindness and his hospitality, his love and his compassion.

And so the great demon left in defeat, never to return. What happened to that demon after this meeting with the elderly priest is anyone’s guess. Some say that although he left that place empty-handed he received more than he could ever have imagined. And the priest? He simply ascended his stairs, got into bed and drifted off to sleep, all the time wondering what guise his Christ would take next.

Now remember, it’s a parable. Don’t get hung up on the demon. The story is not about the demon, it’s about the priest. And the guy who wrote the parable calls it an impossible hospitality – one that flings it’s doors open to anybody, without conditions, without any concern for your stuff, or your self, or your family.

Now, in his commentary on the parable, Rollins contrasts the priest’s hospitality with the kind we usually extend. He says, we usually welcome those who are like us, we usually welcome those we like, and we welcome them as long as they are polite. In other words, our hospitality is usually conditional. I welcome you as long as I like you, and as long as you behave, in my house, you are welcome. In other words, I welcome you as long as it is good for me.

Which is okay. There is nothing wrong with having people you like over for a good time. Share a meal, share a game, share a movie, talk about stuff you enjoy. That's all cool. But it's not exactly what God meant when he told us to practice hospitality. Rollins says, the kind of hospitality God wants us to model has to extend to those who are not like us, people we don't have to like at all, people who will not always be polite.

You see, a conditional hospitality is easy – anybody can do that, pagans do that. An unconditional hospitality – well that's nearly impossible. What if they are just trying to use us? What if they hurt some of my stuff; what if they take some of my stuff? What if they use me? Or abuse me? Or worse: what if they hurt my family? An impossible hospitality is risky, isn't it? And yet, a hospitality that is just extended towards those who are like me, towards those I like, towards those who are always polite – anybody can do that. There's no reward from God for that, is there?

But to welcome a demon is all but impossible, isn't it? We're not even sure it's right, even if it were possible. But what if we were to discover that our demon is not really a demon at all. Maybe that's just how we see someone who is badly broken, badly damaged, all twisted up. And it is possible, is it not, for God's grace – through us – to get through to someone who most see as a demon? And even if it doesn't "work," even if grace does not transform the "demon," some form of hospitality is still God's way, isn't it? Remember, the parable isn't really about the demon, it's about the priest – it's about us. It's not about what is in the heart of the demon, it's about what is in our hearts, whether there are limits to our grace that God does not honor.

Now, it is rather extraordinary that we are tackling this theme of hospitality a week after the Paris bombings. We scheduled this sermon last summer. And then a week ago Isis launched a wave of attacks in Paris killing at least 129 people and wounding 350 more – France's 9/11. And now all across Europe countries that were opening their arms to the Syrian refugees are having second thoughts: "If we are too hospitable, we will let demons slip into our house." And that has just fueled the immigration debate in our country: this time it's not about the Hispanics, this time it's about the Iraqi's, and the Syrians, and other Muslim immigrants. And our people are divided. Should we let them in? Is it really possible to pre-

screen them adequately to have some confidence we are not letting terrorists in? Should we let just the Christians in?

Connie came into my office last week and she was really bothered. She said, “These sermons have been really good.” I threw that in so that you guys know that at least 1 person thinks these sermons have been really good. She said, “This idea of leaning into the messes is really good, but aren’t there limits? Is that what our government should be doing, instead of protecting its citizens? Now, that’s a great question! A whole bunch of our governors are telling Washington – not here, don’t put them here, not in our state. And others think that closing our borders is a violation of who we are, and what we do. You know, “Give me your tired, your poor” ... because ours is a nation of immigrants. And we are struggling with this question: is there any difference between the responsibility of a God honoring government, and the responsibility of a God-honoring Christian. You see a God-honoring government is supposed to protect its people; but a God-honoring Christian is supposed to show the world an impossible hospitality. So those two missions can clash, can’t they?

So ... in our quest to lean into the messy, we need to slow down here and figure out what God-honoring hospitality means. Now, this may surprise you, but hospitality is one of the most important virtues of a Jesus follower. One guy calls it: “the quintessential Christian practice.” And it was maybe the most inflammatory, and the most subversive part of Jesus’ ministry and teaching. And as time passed, an impossible hospitality became one of those things that made us Christians different. Listen to what the Bible says:

- The apostle Paul says, “Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians (we can do that; but then he says), and open your homes to strangers.” (Romans 12.13) Open your homes to strangers ... Literally, he says, “practicing hospitality.” And what’s really cool is that the word for hospitality in Greek is a compound word: philoxenia (philos means love; and a xenos is a stranger). Share your stuff with fellow Jesus followers, but be sure to love strangers too.
- Over in 1 Timothy Paul gives some instructions to the elders. He tells us, “An elder has to be faithful to his wife, and self-controlled, and respectable, and hospitable...” (1 Timothy 3.2) The Good News

Translation says, “He must welcome strangers in his home.” Now that’s not because he’s an elder, it’s because elders are supposed to model what all of us are supposed to do too.

- Later on he tells us to honor widows “who have brought up their children well, and who have received strangers in their homes. (1 Timothy 5.10) They show hospitality to strangers, even though that can be scary for a widow, can’t it?”
- This one is so powerful; you’ve probably heard it before. The book of Hebrews in our Bible puts it like this. It says, “Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!” (Hebrews 13.2) Have you ever wondered whether someone you encountered could have been an angel? Has it ever crossed your mind? It has mine, especially when I haven’t practiced hospitality well.
- One more. Now this one doesn’t use the word hospitality, but it tells us why ours has to be different. These are the instructions of Jesus. He says, “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. (And that makes sense; we can do that.) But I say, love your enemies! (Now that’s different; that’s flat out hard. He says, and) Pray for those who persecute you! (Because) In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven... (Listen, he’s not telling us to pray against them; he’s telling us to pray for them. Because, he says). If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. (But we are different. We’re way different. In fact he says,) You are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5.43-48) That sounds impossible, doesn’t it?

And that takes it to an entirely different level. You see, the kind of hospitality the Bible is talking about goes way beyond having friends over for the game, or even hosting one of our life groups. This isn’t just about treating well those who are like me, or those I like, or those I trust. This is about treating well those who are not part of my circle, those who are not like me, even those I don’t like.

And the kind of hospitality the Bible is talking about goes way beyond the hospitality of a Disney World. Go to Disney world and they are amazing! They try to give you a smile-worthy experience from the moment you get out of your car. And we do some of that here, at church. We know that a guest's first impression of Capital City starts in our parking lot. And that impression will be tested by how we greet them in our foyer, and how our teachers receive their kids, and how our family welcomes them in our worship center. We know that most people will have already decided whether to come back to Capital City or not ... way before I ever get up here to preach.

No, that's not the kind of hospitality I'm talking about. The kind of hospitality the Bible is talking about is subversive. It's a breaking down of walls. Instead of disgust, and contempt, and cliques ... in here you are welcome, in here you are embraced, in here you are wanted. That's the kind of church we want to be; that's the kind of people God calls us to be...

Now here's what we do sometimes. Most of us don't mind some of the messy. Most of us are quite willing to love on some of the messy, as long as we get to choose which ones. Some of us have a soft heart for the homeless – like our Soup Kitchen people. Some of us have a soft heart for the orphans – like Chris and Marissa. Some of us have a soft heart for the poor – like Betty Lawson. Some of us have a soft heart for Hispanics – like Julie and me.

Well, Jesus talks about separating the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25. Here's my retranslation. Jesus said, "Some of the messy were hungry and thirty, and some of you were there for them." And they said, "Been there, done that, feels good!" Jesus said, "Some of the messy were strangers, and some of you invited them into your home." They said, "Been there, done that. It was hard but rewarding." But others said, "That wasn't my gift, that wasn't my passion." Jesus said, "Some of the messy were naked, and some of you gave them clothes. Some of the messy we sick, and some of you cared for them." And some of us replied, "Well, I did shoe boxes for Christmas, but I don't do hospitals." And Jesus said, "Some of the messy were in prison, and some of you were there for them, and their families." And some said, "Been there, done that." While others said, "I can do thieves and muggers, but I can't tolerate sex offenders."

But listen ... listen guys ... That's not how it works, for Jesus followers. That's not how it works for those of us who call him Lord. We don't get to pick which messy we lean into. You see, the test of a God-honoring hospitality is whether we are willing to lean in to those we are inclined to lean away from. You see, I'm talking about the heart. God is trying to reshape us from the inside out. He's trying to get us to look at people the way he does, to treat people the way he does, to grace people the way he graced us in Christ ... in Christ. He wants us to recognize how he values the messy. He wants us to offer his friendship, his acceptance.

Now that isn't easy. In fact, it's flat out hard. It is especially hard for those of us who have been infected with the self-centeredness, the self-absorption, of our culture. Hundreds of years ago an old dead guy named Martin Luther feared that too many Jesus followers were afflicted by an "incurvatus in se," a "self turned inward." It's all about me, what I like, what I want, what feeds me. A self-absorption, a self-worship. And what was a problem in the time of Martin Luther is an epidemic now. Guys, "incurvatus in se" kills "agape." Our obsession with self kills our ability to love people God's way. Do you buy that?

Well, not entirely. We push back. You see, our fear of hospitality is not just selfishness, doing hospitality God's way is dangerous, isn't it? What if ... What if we try to be hospitable, and people just use us? It happens all the time. Some people just want your stuff, they just want your money. I remember being at the gas station near the interstate after church when this guy drives up, all smiles, waving like he knows me. I figure he probably does – I'm terrible with names and faces. And then he says, "Can you give me some money for gas?" And I said, "I can help you. I'll take you down to the police station. There's a chaplain down there who helps people get gas." Then he says, "I don't want his money, I want yours." And this dork started quoting the Bible to me, about how we are supposed to give when asked. Ticked me off. And you've got your stories. You try to help someone, and they just want to use you. Kind of makes you timid about hospitality, doesn't it?

And then, what if ... What if we try to be hospitable and we get hurt? Jim McKay was our discipleship minister a few years back, a really good man. He stopped on the interstate one time to help some people who had their

hood up. It was an ambush. If you lean into the messy, sometime messy people can hurt you, or yours. It's risky, isn't it?

So I can point to the verses that call us to a different kind of hospitality. And I can give you reasons, even biblical reasons, if we had the time, that we need to be cautious about too radical a hospitality. We want to do right, we want to be God honoring, but sometimes it is hard to figure out how, isn't it? So, let me offer a couple suggestions. These aren't going to be satisfying. They are not going to make it easy for us know exactly what God wants from us when he brings the messy into our lives. But see if these help a little.

Maybe ... Maybe we ask the wrong question. You see, I think we usually want to know what kind of messy people God wants us to lean in to. Who is it, God, that you want me to be hospitable towards? And who are those, God, to whom we really don't need show hospitality? Who do I have the right to exclude? In fact, whom do I have a responsibility to exclude? When can I shut my doors? Who, when they ask me for money, can I say no to?

But remember, guys, the parable wasn't about the demon, it was about the priest. It's not about what is in the demon's heart, it's about what's in the priest's heart.

Are you willing to look at people through God's eyes? I know they are messy, but they are still precious to him. I know that sometimes they sin a lot, and sometimes they sin big. But they have not out-sinned God's grace. Can you see in people the image of God, even when they have messed all over it? Can you love the unlovable ... like he loves you? You see, it's not about what's in their heart, it's about what's in your heart.

And are you willing to love your neighbor as much as -- as much as -- you love yourself? I'm talking about a life that is not self-centered, priorities that are not self-centered. Instead of "incurvatus in se," we are "incurvatus ad deum." Instead of being curved inward, we are bent towards God, and we lean towards those he loves.

And are you willing to tip towards mercy, rather than sacrifice when they clash? Jesus said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” He actually wants both, but when they clash – we choose mercy.

Remember, it’s not about the demon, it’s about the priest. It’s not about figuring out who I have to be hospitable to; it’s about trying to figure out if there is a way I can be hospitable. Sometime it may be hard; sometimes it may be impossible. But we shouldn’t be looking for excuses not to; we need to be looking for ways we can ... lean in ... to the messy.

And it’s so powerful. Have you ever been the recipient of a selfless, God-honoring hospitality? Have you ever felt it personally? I’m not talking about being invited over to dinner with friends, or family. Have you ever been in a crisis? I have. Nearly 21 years ago I taught New Testament at a Bible College. I was a rather outspoken professor, and rather controversial – shock of shocks. And some preachers came after my head. And after a while, the college gave it to them. I was fired. I was broken, I was scared. I loved the college, I loved what I was doing, my kids were nearing college age and as a professor they could go free. But we were rather poor, and had no money to help them. Being fired is embarrassing, and the college didn’t want me to tell anyone why – because that would make other mad, who liked what I was doing. Have you ever felt broken, and scared, and shamed? And during that time, did you ever experience some courageous person, or some courageous family as they drew alongside and were there for you? Then you know what a different kind of hospitality feels like; and you know why it is so important.

A hurricane hits, and you lose your home, and people you don’t know open their home. Your wife and your daughter are coming home late at night, their car breaks down, and strangers take care of your family. You are an outcast, you are a newcomer, you have messed up at work, you have sinned big ... and instead of leaning away, someone leans in. And it breaks your heart.

That’s what I’m talking about. That’s the kind of hospitality the Bible is talking about, I think. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you

gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Guys, Thanksgiving is coming, and then Christmas. Did you know that God is going to give you an opportunity to lean in to the messy? Don't be so concerned about what's in their heart, just make sure that your heart is pure. Sometimes God uses messes to bring us into the life of someone we would never have rubbed shoulders with any other way. God's going to give you an opportunity to lean in – guys, so let him use you. It can change their life, and it can change yours.