

A Zeal God Will Not Own

The other day, I was cleaning out my old Gmail account. It's the account where I send all of my spam, and it is the email I give out when I don't want to share my email. It is a veritable wasteland of unread emails. Many of those emails are from subscriptions they range from stock information, LinkedIn articles, and similar content.

To give you an idea of how far back these emails go, I made it to 2019! Pre COVID. I found an article whose goal was to compile a list of the top 10 employers in America, specifically the businesses with the highest employee satisfaction.

Would anyone like to venture a guess as to which business held the mantle in 2019?

Believe it or not - Trader Joe's secured the top position according to Forbes magazine.

It's been a few years, and a lot has changed in the world since 2019. Nevertheless, let's take the article at face value. Trader Joe's had the highest employee satisfaction in 2019.

I wonder why.

It must be more than just the employee discounts. Although being the first to sample the newest variation of Joe Joe's sounds amazing, there must be something more to the job than just cleaning spills, bagging groceries, stocking shelves, and dinging the bell at the cash register.

This is what I've come to realize. At its core, Trader Joe's and its store culture revolve around hospitality. The employees are treated well, the stores are welcoming, and even though the employees never seem like they're working, they truly are. It's as if they genuinely enjoy what they're doing. Imagine that!

It could be just like any other job, but I suspect that the people who choose to work at Trader Joe's do so because they want to be part of a positive culture and find joy in serving others—hospitality.

At its core, the gospel lesson spanning the ninth and tenth chapters of Matthew deals with hospitality.

I know this because of one of its more troubling statements - something Jesus said.

In today's gospel lesson, we encounter the passage about dusting off our shoes. This metaphor has been interpreted in various ways, some more responsible than others. As with all things in the Bible, context and culture are crucial.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has revealed his identity, gathered his disciples, performed miracles, and is testing the waters. He wants to find out if the people of Israel are ready to follow him, to truly understand that he is God.

To accomplish this, Jesus sends the twelve disciples on a mission known as the little commission. It is called "little" because it is focused. At the end of Matthew's gospel, we encounter the *great* commission, where the disciples are instructed to baptize people in the name of the Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit, and to go to *all* nations. However, in this instance, Jesus sends the disciples solely to the people of Israel.

So, what does Jesus tell them? He instructs them to carry no money, extra clothing, food, or any possessions. They are to go from town to town proclaiming the good news, spreading the message that the kingdom of God is imminent.

If they are welcomed into a household, they are to share their peace and receive the hospitality of others, without asking for anything in return. However, if they encounter a town or household that refuses to welcome them, they are to shake off the dust from their sandals and move on.

It might seem strange that Jesus tells the disciples to leave with only the clothes on their backs. Would any of us do that? I think most of us would think twice. But there is a deeper meaning at play here.

In ancient Jewish culture, hospitality held great importance. Jesus instructs the disciples to go empty-handed to determine who among the people of Israel would be hospitable. He wants to see if God's people will welcome his message.

Hospitality was a significant value in their culture, so refusing it or neglecting to give it was a serious matter.

Since it is written in the text, we can assume that the disciples encountered people who were not particularly hospitable to the good news. In this message, we find something troubling.

Jesus states that it would be better for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those who reject the hospitality of the good news.

Yes, that's a difficult statement. Essentially, Jesus is saying that if you are an Israelite, someone who follows the Torah, and you refuse to acknowledge the good news, you will face severe judgment.

We can understand how this text can be misused, especially considering the various connotations and misrepresentations associated with Sodom and Gomorrah. The only thing – the people who weaponize it don't realize that they are passing judgment upon themselves.

If you truly want to challenge yourself and reflect on what hospitality or its absence means for our world today, consider the inhospitable environment that has been created for our LGBTQIA+ siblings.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that those sexual orientations are considered sinful. Even if they are, Jesus and Matthew are telling us that there is something even more significant than that sin, and that is the sin of being inhospitable. Even if people with those identities are considered sinful, the act of being inhospitable is worse. And even if homosexuality is a sin, it is no better or worse a sin than the one Jesus calls out – and more to the point – It would still be forgiven and fall under the umbrella of grace – a grace that we all receive.

So, there you have it. Sodom and Gomorrah points the finger back at those who are inhospitable. And isn't that what the law does, my friends?

Jesus was serious about this matter. He wanted to find out who would be welcoming, so he charted a course into uncharted territory – a territory of acceptance and grace.

And isn't that where we live?

Our lives are uncharted territory. We are constantly traveling towards something, and while we may have an idea of where we are going, it never turns out exactly as planned. That's precisely what happened to the disciples. They were equipped with a message and the clothes on their backs. They knew they had a higher purpose, but how everything would work out – that was unknown. However, the message they brought filled them with such joy and motivation that they were willing to travel from town to town – trusting that others would show the love they proclaimed.

**Ask yourself, what is it about being a Christian that would give you the motivation and joy to go from town to town like the disciples relying solely on the hospitality of others?**

You see, that's the audacity of the gospel. That's the part that captivates us. Jesus isn't asking for just a portion of ourselves. Jesus wants all of us, our entire being, and even more than that, he wants us to love one another.

Last week, we sang one of my favorite hymns: "There Is a Wideness in God's Mercy." I particularly resonate with the third verse:

"For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind,  
And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.  
But we make this love too narrow by false limits of our own,  
And we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own."

Throughout Scripture, Jesus consistently shows us that we place limits on God's love. He teaches us through healing people, addressing not just their physical needs but also their spiritual ones. He demonstrates this by serving not those whom we would expect, but those whom we wouldn't.

Jesus is our example, and even after two thousand years, we are still called to live out God's grand drama. We may not have significant roles, but we are characters, nonetheless. And today, we hear the words directed at the supporting cast: "the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

When I hear this passage, I often see it being used as a weapon to guilt parishioners into performing more tasks. While I believe that the reminder to engage in ministry is important, I find the subtext far more intriguing.

This passage isn't just about us; it's about a world in need.

The world is hurting, and people need to experience God's love. It may seem like the plentiful part is the need for love, but Jesus is telling us that the laborers are few. We need more people who show love, hospitality, and Christlikeness. That's where we come in. We don't come in as a weary and begrudging group of believers who serve reluctantly. Instead, we see faith as something to be lived out not out of obligation, but out of genuine desire. We view ministry as a joyful expression of God's love.

I encourage you to think about the question I posed earlier. Let me reframe the question. Let's make it easier. Instead of going from town to town - What is it about ministry brings you such joy that you would want to shout it from the top of the steeple?

Right now - speaking for, *me* - myself, I know what that would be.

I would take the message of God's love – this stole and display it prominently on the cross outside. And in doing so make it crystal clear that Jesus died for *all* and that Jesus loves everyone, regardless of their background, beliefs, previous sins – *whatever*.

As a community of saved individuals – and this we believe, we are called – however imperfect it may be at times, to love *all* people. And what a challenge that is.

Two weekends ago Jess and I were invited to walk in the Pride parade downtown. I wore my "This Pastor Loves You" shirt, the one with the rainbow spelling out the word 'pastor'. Truth be told - I wasn't sure what to expect, but to my surprise, there were people who pointed it out joyfully. They were glad to see a pastor representing God's love in a way that is often seen as less than hospitable. It really took me aback. The first time someone said something I simply smiled and gave a thumbs up because I was so caught off guard.

But that experience gives me hope. It tells me that even in a community that is being oppressed and marginalized by those who claim Christianity as their moral armor, there are still people who seek understanding, knowledge, and a life immersed in the love of Christ and the grace we receive through him. And if that isn't a testimony to the working of the Holy Spirit, I'm not sure what is.

I'm not quite sure what to do with all of this, but it weighs heavily on my heart, and this type of love and acceptance it's what I would shout from the top of the steeple.

I mean - why are we so afraid to simply say what we already know in our hearts?

I – Wes Smith, have never been politicized. My existence in the public arena has never been questioned – my humanity has never been debated - why then are we doing that to others, because they are different? That's not good enough. That's not what we see in scripture. Jesus sat and ate with the ones deemed different, and he sits with them today. And if that makes you uneasy – friends, know that Jesus came to make us uneasy, to get us to see that our love is too narrow – that's the Gospel message – that's its audacity – God loves *all*.

I'm going to leave you with that. And I use it as *an* example.

I challenge you to reflect on what fires you up for ministry – and it can be *anything*.

What is it about this gathering we have on Sundays – what is it about the message of God's grace and love that makes you want to serve God?

Contemplate how Christ Church and our lives can be an example of radical hospitality, and while you do that let the final words of my favorite hymn echo in your mind:

"Make our love, O God, more faithful; let us take you at your word, and our lives will  
be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord."

Amen.