

**“On Saying Hello!”
First Christian Church
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I pulled in to one of the local drive through restaurant's this past week to pick up a diet cherry-limeaid ... and the young woman on the inside said to me ... that'll be \$1.49 hun.” “Hun?” I thought to myself. I gave her a \$5 and in a few seconds she opened her window again and said ... “Here's your change sweetie.” And I thought ... “sweetie”? Momentarily, she opened the window again and said “here's your lime-aid darlin' ... now you have yourself a Super Sonic day.” “Darlin'” I thought to myself? As I drove away I wondered to myself if she called everybody “hun” and “darling” ... and “sweetie” ... or if she just kind of like the way I looked ... or maybe it was her way of kind of showing respect ... or maybe pity ... to older men. Whatever it was that led her to greet me with those terms that I usually reserve for people like my wife ... or my granddaughter ... it made me think ... about the ways we greet people ... or fail to greet people. From an even deeper perspective ... it's about how we initiate relationships.

Twenty years ago on August 1, 1990 ... I stood behind this pulpit for the first time and I began my first sermon at FCC Topeka by saying ... and I am quoting from the manuscript now ...

Good morning! You don't know me! Oh, many of you recognize my face from when we met at a reception back in May, and if you read that little flier that Ken Bronson and his committee put together you certainly know about me, but you really don't know me, and I don't know you. We have some getting acquainted to do, and I look forward to that with great anticipation. I thought I might start out this morning by telling you that to the state of Kansas, I am B6J4H8...and nothing else. That is how they know me. With those six digits. And when I was stopped by a police officer several months ago in Wichita, Kansas on the charges of having made an illegal left hand turn onto Kellogg Street, the officer stepped up to my window and said to me...."May I see your identification please?" And I did what every good respectable American motorist would do under the circumstances, I said a little prayer under my breath, and gave the kindly officer my driver's license, and he wrote down the six digit number that identifies me in this great state. B6J4H8.

That is how I said “hello” to you for the first time. But the real point of the sermon was to say ... that we live in an impersonal world, and the role of the church ... is to affirm our personhood for who we are ... and to know us by our name. I read through that old sermon this week ... where I made the point that we live in a world where .. most of the people we do business with ,, know us only as a number ... and to prove my point ... I recited quite a few of my numbers taken directly from my wallet. But my real point was to say that our job in the church ... is to get to know each other ... not only as acquaintances ... but to understand and affirm our gifts ... and talents ... and to encourage each other as we use those special abilities to the glory of God. That's what it means to say “hello” ... in the church!

I have been thinking a lot over the past few weeks ... about the transition in our lives that we are preparing to experience as I bring closure to my 20 year ministry here at First Christian .. Topeka. One book I read in preparation for this gigantic step I am taking ... quoted a Christian Psychologist as saying that he believes that 98% of the all the people in Institutions for the emotionally disturbed ... are there because they fouled up at either saying “Hello” or saying “Good-bye” in relationships in their lives. Now you might dismiss that statement at first glance. I think I did. That just can't be. But then, I began to think

about the pastoral counseling I have done over the years ... and I have concluded that the Psychologist is probably not that far off. Think about it. Some children come in to the world and have no one in their family to really say Hello to them. My wife is a home health care nurse ... and has come across any number of shaken babies ... who have received lifetime physical limitations as a result of physical abuse as a baby. That is an the extreme case ... but there are lots and lots of children that simply get ignored. Can you imagine what it is like trying to learn to say “Hello” in your relationships throughout life ... when no one ever really welcomed you when you came into the world? More and more, behavioral scientists are talking about “attachment disorder”. It is a disorder that many people experience all through their lives ... as they struggle to establish and maintain relationships. Often that disorder is a direct result ... say the scientists ... of people not receiving the needed attachment ... welcome ... at the time of birth or in early childhood. Those who work with small children see the effects of this disorder all the time. I’ve heard teachers talk about how little kindergarteners greet each other on the first day of school. Most kids find it easy to make friends ... start up conversations ... and play well on the play-ground. But there are always a few in the group .. who say hello by taking someone else’s toy away from them ... or some other inappropriate behavior. It’s hard to know how to say hello ... if no one ever welcomed and greeted you when you came into the world. Incidentally ... this very fact ... the importance of what children learn at a very young age that is carried over into their adult lives ... is why I think early childhood education in the church ... is such an important ministry.

This story we read this morning from the book of Genesis is one of the classic narratives that is often brought to mind when people of faith consider the meaning of radical hospitality. Our scriptures are full of stories of people who “welcomed the stranger” as Abraham and Sarah did on that hot day in the desert. The word “hospitality” ... truly means ... Welcome the stranger. I love this story though, and it’s especially a delightful story to contemplate with a Bible study group of people in their 80’s and 90’s. Abraham and Sarah are old people in this story. In their 90’s ... and they are a barren old couple. I’m sure they had given up on the possibility of being parents ... decades before this incident took place. So here is this very old man ... Abraham ... sitting at the opening of his tent in the desert ... likely dozing in the midst of the heat of the noonday sun ... and in the distance he sees three men approaching ... the fact that they are traveling at this extremely hot time of the day would make Abraham question their sensibility. Even so, Abraham jumps up ... well ... he figures out a way to get up out his reclining position ... and greets the three men. In fact, the author of Genesis tells us ... Abraham bows so low before his visitors that his beard drags in the dust. An act of welcome hospitality.

The author goes on to tell us that Abraham offers them a meal ... actually ... as it turns out ... it really is a feast. Abraham then ducks into his tent and quickly orders his wife Sarah to bake some cakes. We’re not talking about fussy little tea cakes here. He tells her to knead into dough three measures of flour, which is about 32 quarts. Do you know how much cake can be made with 32 quarts of flour? Can you imagine how hard it would be to knead a lump of dough that big? Especially for a 90 year old lady! Abraham’s hospitality is getting out of hand! After ordering the cakes to be baked .. Abraham then runs to the barnyard, leads a calf to one of his servants, and tells him to slaughter and prepare it. A great deal of meat will come from this one calf. No refrigeration is available for keeping the leftovers. This dinner for the three travelers will be a really big deal! What’s going on here?

We are not too far into the story before the reader is made to understand that these three men ... are messengers of God. The point is ... when Abraham was faithfully hospitable to the 3 visitors ... he was in effect ... hospitable to God. That line of reasoning reminds me of Jesus and his parable of the last judgment ... where he basically teaches that radical hospitality is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Remember his words ...

I was hungry and you fed me ... thirsty and you gave me something to drink ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothes. I was a prisoner and you came to visit me. And those listening said ... “Lord, when did we see you hungry ... or thirsty? When did we see you naked or as a stranger? When did we visit you in prison. And Jesus said ... when you did it to the least of these my sisters and brothers ... you did it to me.

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews likely remembers the story of Abraham and Sarah, when in the 13th chapter of that book ... the reader is reminded to welcome the strangers in their midst ... for when you do so you may be entertaining angels. That is the rest of the story from the narrative in Genesis. Those three men whom Abraham greeted with such grace ... had actually come to tell he and Sarah that God was going to give them a child, and that from that child would come a great nation of people. It was so hard to believe ... that when Sarah heard it ... she giggled. So do the ladies in my Bible class at First Apartments when we read that story. We’ve tried to imagine what it would be like to be 90 years old ... and pregnant with your first child. Most of the ladies do not find Sarah’s chuckle to be surprising. Most would find it to be horrifying!

Hospitality ... saying hello ... welcoming the stranger ... radical hospitality has been at the base of the Christian movement from its very inception! When a group of our leaders began our work together on Faithful Planning 6 years ago ... we were challenged to name our core values. What are the values of our life together as a community of faith ... that define us and are at the very foundation of who we are as Disciples? And one of the first values to be lifted up was ... “We are a welcoming community. All people ...everyone ... is welcome here.” Hospitality ... when you stop to think about it, this whole idea of welcoming people into the community is really at the very base of our entire theology as people of Christian faith.

It feels good to belong to this community of faith, but I submit to you that we are living in a lonely world today. There are lots of folks out there who are looking for a place to belong. We have a wonderful gift here at First Christian Church. We truly do experience community here but are we willing to share the gift? We have a multi-million dollar physical plant in our beautiful, newly renovated space here at 1880 Gage Boulevard new welcoming space and renovated education centers ... will we welcome people with them? Do our buildings and grounds say .. “Welcome! We love this place and we extend it to you, neighbors and friends?” Does our nursery say ... “Welcome new parents. We want to help you nurture your child with love and good news?” My answer to those questions is ... “We are trying!”

First Christian Church is embarking on a new chapter in your history ... and that is why I wanted to say these things about hospitality in this, my next to last sermon here. There are going to be some important opportunities for you to say “hello” in the very near future. There will be new leadership ... a new interim minister will be introduced to you in the not too distant future ... and it will be your job to say ... “hello”. Welcome. It will be your job to extend hospitality to a new pastor when that time comes ... on down the road.

One of the last words I want to leave with you this morning ... is really the same message I delivered to you in my first sermon ... practice radical hospitality. Make this church a church for all people. Diana Butler Bass makes the observation in the book our men’s group is reading together right now ... that offering hospitality... is one of the ten signposts of renewal in mainline protestant churches she has visited in preparation for writing her most recent book. Hospitality looks like this ... says Butler-Bass ... when she visited a church in Naples Florida: “Everywhere, people welcome each other. A preppy looking

retired man is talking to a man covered with tattoos ... A man who appears to be Haitian chats with some teens ... The minister is standing with them ... a long braided pony-tail falls down his back. ... Three black-clad teenager girls with pierced noses and Goth makeup approach an elderly woman in a wheelchair. One by one they lean down, kiss the woman on the cheek and ask her how she is doing.” Says Butler Bass ... this church “appears to be a congregation in which wayfarers and strangers have become friends.”

That’s radical hospitality. And it doesn’t come easy.

But I am reminded of a story ... that has etched itself in to my memory with a degree of permanency ...reminding me of just how important the idea of hospitality is to the integrity of the church of Jesus Christ. And this story makes it clear I hope ... why the subject of hospitality ... is the subject of this ... my next to last sermon to share with you. Here’s the story.

A group of people decided one day that they wanted to build a life saving station on the coast of the sea. Their purpose would be to rescue people who had become lost at sea. They would bring them back to shore, provide facilities for them to clean up, and to be fed a good hot meal, and to help them back on their way. The group started out with a high success rate in rescuing the lost and everyone felt good about what they were doing. The group continued with their mission for several years, and those who lives had been saved were in the hundreds. One day ... someone in the group suggested that it would be good to kind of take shifts on watching for those suffering from shipwreck, and the rest of the group would play bridge. They developed a Building Policy Manual ... which clearly stated that one particular area was to be used by the Bridge players. As time passed by, the suggestion was made that it would be nice to carpet the building, and decorate it in kind of a seacoast motif with nets and ropes, you know ... like they do down at that fast food seafood restaurant. So the building was all fixed up, and the card parties just grew and grew. And then one day it happened. One of the members of the life saving station brought in a person who had been lost at sea who was particularly dirty and who flat out smelled like dead fish. And he got mud on the carpet and messed up the whole place and the folks who were there that day to play bridge were particularly disgusted. They said ... Would he walk around on nice fresh clean carpet at home ... with muddy feet? The bridge players decided to appoint their spokesperson to speak out at the next board meeting ... asking for a new policy ... that a new shower stall be installed ... outside ... for obvious reasons. But one small group of people said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. “Are we here to be a bridge club? Or are we here to be a life saving station?” And an argument broke out among the members. and guess what. The bridge club people won. No more muddy smelly people were to be brought in the building. That was written in the by-laws, and passed by a two-thirds majority. And the official Building Policy Manual was amended to reflect the vote. The small group who was determined to continue with their original purpose determined that their only recourse was to withdraw from that group and go on down the coast and build another simple little seacoast life saving station. And so they did. Today, they say if you visit that same seacoast, there are lifesaving stations all along the shore but only a few are really tuned in to their purpose of maintaining their lighthouse day and night.

Saying hello. It’s a core value! It’s the central message of this welcome table. Everyone is welcome here ... because it is the Table of our Lord. If Christ welcomes YOU ... then who are you to refrain from welcoming ANYONE ... who is looking for a place to call home?

Amen.