



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Hospitality: Shallow and Deep”*

*Matthew 25:34-40*

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Before I get into my sermon, I want to give a brief report on my study sabbatical which just ended. I am grateful for this church’s commitment to the support of an educated clergy. I am grateful that its cost did not impact the budget due to the William R. Klein Fund established by Barton and Margaret Morris.

And I am grateful for the gift Millie and I received to celebrate my being a pastor here for 20 years. That gift made it possible for Millie and me to join Ed and Jenny McLeod on a 10-day Viking Cruise. I’m not normally swayed by advertisements, but I’ve wanted to go on one of those cruises since the first time I saw them promoted on PBS. The trip was glorious... and even educational for we visited several places significant in Church history. The money is gone, but we have memories that will last the rest of our lives. Thank you.

There were two other trips I want to tell you about because they set the stage for some special opportunities later this fall. Early on, I spent ten days at Union Presbyterian Seminary reading books in theology and in architecture and I found they have much in common. Later this fall, I will teach a three-week Wednesday night series based on those readings called, “Buildings and Belief.”

Second, Ed McLeod and I traveled to a city where I spent part of my childhood; Montgomery, Alabama. We visited the Legacy Museum and Memorial which tells the story of slavery, lynching, imprisonments and the Civil Rights struggle. Our trip could not have been timed better because it took place right after the terrible news of the race-based shootings in El Paso. To hear the stories of hate speech and hate crimes of the past helps in considering hate speech and hate crimes today.



I came home and lined up a program. A documentary is being made about young Presbyterian ministers who, in the 1960s, served churches in the deep south and who, at risk to their jobs, families and even their lives, were brave enough to make a stand for Civil Rights. Some of those ministers are still with us and were interviewed for the documentary. The director and producer will show two of the interviews and then there will be Q&A. The two ministers interviewed will be here for the conversation. They are Dick Harvison, with his wife Barbara; and Eade Anderson, with his wife Jane. Eade is a former Interim Minister here at Second Presbyterian (and my dad).

The last thing I will say about the sabbatical is that I got to be a visitor on Sunday mornings in other churches. That experience relates to what I want to preach today. So, let's move to the passage and sermon.

Hear these words of welcome offered by a king:

<sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

I am not doing justice to Matthew 25 by reading these few verses on their own. Matthew 25 is Jesus' *Sermon on the Last Judgement*. In tone, Matthew's Gospel is the most judgmental of the four gospels, so this chapter is completely in Matthew's voice. This Gospel wants us to know that we are morally accountable; that we need to get straight before facing God.

This what is interesting about "getting straight" in this *Sermon on the Last Judgement*: Without reading the chapter, we might think it would command our accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. But, not so with this sermon. It begins with "all the nations" being gathered before God—all nations, all governments, all cultures, all religions, all governments... all people! The one thing for which they will be held accountable, according to this sermon, is if they loved others... especially those most difficult to love. The one question that they are asked is this: "Did you love your neighbor?" Those who did not are told to get out of the king's sight. Harsh.

I know my own failings and I hope to be eternally grateful that the Gospel does not end with chapter 25 and goes on to tell of Matthew's surprising last word of God's mercy and grace. Still, Jesus isn't playing games. This is his clear expectation of how we are to treat others. How we treat others is how we treat God. And this is especially true when it come to those who are in



need—who are hungry, who need clothing, sick, who are strangers, and who are detained... in prison. “As you *did*, or *did not*, unto the least of these,” the king says, “you did unto me.”

That is Jesus’ sermon, which is a warning. My sermon is not a warning, but an encouragement. But, so I can face those who taught me the Bible at home, college and seminary, I need to make sure you know the darker borders of our happy verses.

The chapter is deep, but I want to start shallow. After all, you can’t go deep without first going shallow. Right?

This was a rare summer when I was not able to go to the beach with my family and I missed it. I know, I know. After all I was able to do on my sabbatical, I know that no one is feeling sorry for me right now, but I would have loved reexperiencing with Emory what I experienced with my older girls when they were toddlers. The first time we took them to a beach, they were wary and clinging. The expanse of the ocean was limitless, and the waves were breaking right toward them. But soon enough they would watch the water wash around their feet and see the patterns in the sand that would form. We would find shells together, or build sand castles, or dig a hole for our own private little pool (I’m told that’s not allowed on some beaches now). Becoming comfortable with where the sea is shallow was the beginning of what came later—years later—when they are swimming or floating deep, or riding waves. Within the experience of the shallow is the potential for exploring the deep.

What is unsettling about this last judgment is that God is met in shallow encounters. The potential for a deep, eternal relationship with God is within those shallow meetings, sometimes with complete strangers. The God with whom we want to spend lasting life is the God who sometimes is present in those we meet for the first time.

The deep potential of the shallow.

Think about the difference between leaving a beloved home and looking for a house to buy. It can be hard to leave a home you loved because your relationship with the place is deep; it is layered with memories. You lived your life in it, you loved and were loved there, to some good degree your identity was shaped within its walls.

As hard as it is to leave a beloved home, it is just as easy for a buyer to pass on a house with deep potential to become one. Ultimately insignificant experiences can be quite significant in the moment. The buyer experiences

a strange smell,  
a neighbor’s dog that won’t stop barking,  
seeing drapes that are too heavy,  
or the color of a bedroom that is shockingly wrong,  
or the exhaustion of seeing the sixth house that day,  
and the first one after lunch.

Bad first impressions can destroy the potential for a house to later become a home.

Or, think about visiting a church. Elizabeth and I both enjoyed study sabbaticals this past year and we compared notes on what it was like to be what some of you are: visitors. We were the



visitors in the pews and not the preacher in the pulpit... or in the case of Elevation Church, the preacher on the screen.

We found the experience helpful because we are like most of you. Many who are here have been part of this congregation all their lives and have never known the walls and halls of this place to be strange, or worship in the sanctuary to be something to figure out. You have been here so long it is hard to remember how it was to enter these buildings for the first time, not knowing where the bathrooms are, or what door to use to enter the sanctuary so that you can come in gently from the back instead of in the sight of God and everybody up front.

It sure is comfortable for me coming into this space. Seeing Joyce Rice, or Kelly Speas, or Ruth Robertson feels comfortable, expected, normal. I have a familiar feel for this space. I can't come in this sanctuary without remembering weddings and funerals for people dear to me, without remembering the mistakes I made preaching (calling "Columbine High School," "Concubine High School"). I have memories of standing in this pulpit and sharing what I think is important with you, and I have memories of those two (Rev. Link and Rev. Thompson) preaching sticky sermons that stayed with me when I went home for lunch with Millie and that continued to stick to me through the week.

What I want visitors here to know is that there is so much potential here to have that deepest experience of hospitality; the sense of belonging, being known, loved and called; there is potential for this place to feel like a second home and these people to feel like a second family.

What I want those for whom this place is a second home to remember or understand is how easy it is for early, shallow experiences, to keep that from happening. Mark Waltz, in his book, *First Impressions*, says that on average, a visitor decides within ten minutes whether or not she or he is welcome in a church. That's not fair. **Ten minutes?** Within the first ten minutes of coming through the sliding doors of the Portico Entrance, someone will already have decided whether or not Second Presbyterian is

a welcoming place,

or a forbidding place,

a place where they are welcome as they are

even if they are not who they hope to become.

This is true for the homeless person, someone new to the valley looking for a church to join, rich or poor, gay or straight, believer and seeker... and for the one who barely knows what church even is but wants to see if there is something there.

We are good at welcoming people here, but it is wise for those who, like me, are comfortable to remember or imagine what it is like to be here for the first time. Since I'm a preacher's kid who grew up in the church and who, even as a visitor of other churches, can make educated guesses as to what is going on, I have had to rely on what I have read and what I've been told. Here is what I've heard and read.

Those visiting here with little to no church experience are like my daughter Paige was the very first time we took her to the ocean. I held her over small waves breaking on the sand. She was balled up; it was like her feet disappeared into her bottom. Then, slowly and warily she



lowered her feet and let her toes touch the water. Those with little to no church background are warily letting their toes touch the water.

Before they even come to a Sunday worship, their impressions about church have been *overly* informed by

what they've heard on the news

(and a lot of that news lately has not been good),

about what they've seen on TV

(televangelists promise more than they can deliver, and church people are often portrayed as buffoons in dramas and sitcoms)

and by word of mouth

(bad news and complaints travel easiest down gossip highways).

It is not all bad, of course for they would not be visiting if they had not heard that something good might be found here: some connection needed in their lives—with God, with others, with some meaningful cause. But they have heard enough, perhaps, to be a bit afraid of what they might encounter.

I've been told that they have questions they won't ask out loud.

“Am I safe here? Is someone going to judge me here? Try to convert me? Are they trying to take my money? Am I going to be asked to kneel, to chant, to pray with my hands up? Is there incense, will there be dancing? Is the preacher going to yell at me, or bore me? Are they going to recite stuff I don't know?” They might look at a bulletin and ask, “What's a Gloria Patri?” “What's an Invocation?” They look at announcements and wonder, “What is a Narthex? What is a Kirk Hall, and how is it different from a Fellowship Hall?” They don't mind not knowing and are willing to learn, but they are worried about being embarrassed if their ignorance is exposed. When the pad is passed down the pew, some wonder about leaving their contact information. “Am I going to be pestered with phone calls? Will this information be sold to some larger office, the headquarters of the Presbyterian denomination, or some businesses that want to sell me Bibles or prayer cloths?” They will notice if no one smiles or speaks to them. On the other hand, one of the prayers even the non-believer might pray in church is, “Please don't make it happen that I have to stand and be identified as an outsider.”

For those of us who have our order of worship practically memorized, who are comfortable with bowing our heads in prayer and don't get nervous during periods of silence—those for whom *Call and Response* is as familiar as exchanging greetings with a neighbor—these questions might sound silly because we instantly know the answers. But with just a little imagination, we realize they are not silly at all. I remember attending a Pentecostal camp meeting with a Pentecostal minister friend. It was radically different from any service I had ever attended, but I enjoyed it and got something out of it because my friend was standing beside me explaining what was happening and what was going to happen next.

Remember, it is the experiences in the shallow end that ultimately make experience of the deep possible. I know I'm preaching to the choir because we are intentional here about our



welcome, but since Elizabeth and I have had fresh experiences, we thought we would remind you of some things before September hits:

- Visitors need to be noticed, but not exposed. Does that make sense?
- They want to be greeted but they don't want to be put on display.
- They want worship to be meaningful. They don't expect to understand all that is going on, but they do want to be able to navigate the experience.
- They want a church to be safe, but don't want to be treated as intruders.
- One of the worst things that can happen is for them to find a seat and then have someone tell them, "You are sitting in our pew." No one owns a pew so that should never be said. But for a visitor, no matter what is meant, what they hear is, "You do not belong here."

That's my report from the shallow end from my having waded into worship at other places.

What is vitally important in the long run, of course, is that the experience of the shallow be one that can lead to the deep. Today, we baptize two children. In some ways, placing a little water on a child's head is akin to a toddler barely touching the water with her toes. But what a deep Gospel we proclaim when that water barely wets the child's scalp.

"Emerson Matthew, Elliot Hugh—you are each a child of God, redeemed by Christ. We can tell you that though we hardly know you yet. This was your truth even when you were in your mother's womb and a stranger to yourself. We baptize you in the identity as God's children and we will treat you as all God's children everywhere are meant to be treated. We will teach you the redeeming, ennobling, dignifying truths of scripture so that you will come to know what it means to already be in God's embrace. Then maybe you will learn what we should remember:

how much it can mean to others,  
even strangers—  
especially those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, and detained—  
how much it can mean,  
the difference it can make,  
when we treat them as we have been treated by God:  
as brothers and sisters in Christ.

