

## **Reading – Why Do You Come, John? By Victoria Safford**

I knew a man once who came to church every Sunday. You may find nothing remarkable in this. But think of it – a man who came every single Sunday, and it was not that he lacked other things to do. I knew him only in the last years of his life – a birthright Unitarian, a retired geologist who, when he was not at church, was a volunteer for Amnesty International, for the local food bank, for the American Civil Liberties Union, for the family planning clinic, the AIDS project, for the Unitarian Universalist district we were part of, for the Audubon Society, and for a splendid community chorus. Busier than any of us still holding full-time jobs, he was committed, effective, clear about what he could and would and, by his own standards, should contribute to the causes he cared for, for the world and people that he cared for. But what set him apart from all of us was that he came every single Sunday, and (because of hearing loss, I think, more than any sense of his own importance) he sat in the front row.

“Why do you come, John? In all kinds of weather, when you’re well and when you’re not, when you like the guest speaker and when you know you won’t, why do you come every Sunday?” I asked him not long before he died. His answer was straightforward, just like the man himself. “I come,” he said, “because somebody might miss me if I didn’t.”

He said it in a way not arrogant at all, but generously, and honestly. He was the kind of person who saw it as his duty and his privilege to welcome newcomers on Sunday morning – not because he needed more friends himself (the man was eighty years old, with a lifetime of friends and colleagues and acquaintances to spare; he had plenty of friends already, more than he could handle). He did it not because he wanted to evangelize the visitors or grow the church (on the contrary, he loved and missed the tiny congregation he’d joined in 1955. He felt a little lost with so many new faces, a little sad at all the changes.) He greeted people as they came, and steered them toward the minister, the coffeepot, the Sunday school, the guest book, the pledge cards, the sign-up sheets, because he felt it was the right and only thing to do. When people come into your home, you welcome them as if nothing in that moment matters more. He worked hard on Sunday mornings, he got up Sundays expecting to work hard to make others feel at home; he came with that in mind. And he was right – after he died, we missed him when he didn’t come.

And do you know what happened? The Sunday after his memorial, someone new (who’d never met John Eric and now would never have the chance) walked right in and sat down in his empty place in the front row. A whole family just sat right down as if they owned the place, as if they had every right to be there, as if we were glad to see them – two women new to town, and their toddler and their baby. They came hoping there was room, and John himself would have been delighted.

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**Radical Hospitality**  
**By Rev. Don Southworth**  
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*Radical Hospitality* is the title of a book by Father Daniel Holman and Lonni Collins Pratt. Father Dan is a prior at St. Benedict monastery in Oxford, Michigan, and Pratt is a journalist whose life has been touched by the radical hospitality she experienced from Father Dan and others at St. Benedict. The last few weeks Cindy, Linda and the Radical Hospitality team have asked me what the definition of radical hospitality is and I have given the same answer to all of them, ‘what do you think it is?’ This is the standard question a therapist asks, and yes I was trained to ask that question a lot when I took pastoral counseling classes in seminary, but it is probably the most important question I could ask you every time I preach. Because while preaching is *my* chance to answer the questions I love to ask you, the only thing that really matters as far as your life goes, is what *do you* think? Especially when it comes to practicing radical hospitality, which is the invitation I offer to us today.

But first a story.

Long ago, in a far-away town an old woman used to sit at the city gates, watching the travelers pass by and sometimes speaking with them. One night as the sun was setting in the sky, a weary man who had been traveling all day, said to the woman, “Excuse me, but I am looking for a place to rest, and I wonder, can you tell me what the people are like in this town?”

The woman smiled and asked him a question of her own. “You have had a long journey and you must be tired. Where do you come from?”

The man was a little surprised by her question but answered, “My home town is Mychester.”

The woman smiled and asked the man, “Oh, what are the people like in Mychester?”

The traveler replied, “Oh you wouldn’t believe how awful people are in Mychester. They don’t care if you are hungry and thirsty; they wouldn’t even pass the time of day with you. And if you ask them for help they turn away, or deliberately send you the wrong way. They are extremely rude and unfriendly.”

“My word,” replied the old woman. “Well, I’m afraid that I have bad news for you. The people here in this town are very much like the people in Mychester. I don’t think you’d like them very much.”

The traveler was disappointed. “Oh well,” he sighed., “I guess I’ll move on then.”

A short time passed, and soon another weary traveler arrived at the city gates. He saw the old woman sitting there, smiled and approached her. “Excuse me,” he said, “but I am looking for a place to rest, and I wonder, can you tell me what people are like in this town?”

The woman smiled back at him, and asked the same question she had asked the first man. “You have had a long journey and must be tired. Where do you come from?”

“I come from Mychester,” he told her.

“Really? And what are the people like in Mychester?” the woman asked.

“Oh, they are so kind,” the traveler replied. “I like them a lot. They are always friendly, ready to help each other and generous to a fault.”

“Well,” the woman told him, “I think you will find a warm welcome here in this city. The people here are very much like the people in Mychester.”

I am not exactly sure why this story reminds me of radical hospitality, but it does. Maybe it is because whenever I hear about people like John in our reading this morning or all the monks at St. Benedict’s or anyplace where radical hospitality is practiced and lived, one of my first reactions is “well that must come easily for them”. Just like it must be for anyone who looks at the world as being full of kind, loving, generous people who are always quick to offer an open heart.

People like Jesus; who is the role model the monks at St. Benedict do their best to live up to.

The rules of St. Benedict are based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Two of the monks speak pretty clearly to what radical hospitality is all about – at least for Benedictine monks: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” And “Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the community are to meet the guest with all the courtesy of love.”

To the best of my knowledge none of us here today are Benedictine monks, so you might be wondering what relevance the teachings of St. Benedict could have in our lives? We do not talk about Christ around here very often so what life lessons could we possibly learn from him? Sometimes a lot. Especially when it comes to preparing our hearts and offering love, acceptance - and ourselves - to another person. Which is the closest definition you will get from me this morning of radical hospitality.

I want you to think about a time, a place, in your life when you were offered radical hospitality. I am not talking about the kind of hospitality that is offered by the “hospitality industry” with warm, comfy beds, free breakfast and chocolates on your pillow at night. Those things are nice but I am talking about a time when someone welcomed you into their home, their religious community, their heart in such a way that you knew you were not only welcomed but loved. A time when you maybe even felt cherished and the wall between the hearts of two strangers melted away.

And I want you to think about the last time you offered that type of welcome, that type of love to another. A person you never met, a person who was different than you, a person who you offered your home, your religious community, your heart with an openness and a love that transcended the fears, the barriers that we build to defend ourselves.

For the Johns among us today these memories will be easy to find. Some people seem to have a natural gift for embracing the stranger, for offering their hearts, their arms to someone they have never met. They have a twinkle in their eyes and often a child-like wonder as they reach out to the stranger, and for those who radical hospitality is sincere and genuine, the stranger responds with an openness, with a respect that says “thank you for inviting me into your world.”

But for the rest of us, memories of receiving and giving radical hospitality, radical love, to a stranger, might take a little longer to recall. After all aren't we taught from an early age to stay away from strangers because they are dangerous, aren't we taught to be careful with inviting people into our lives and offering our love too quickly?

The authors of *Radical Hospitality* write, “When we speak of hospitality we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. Each of us make choices about who will and who will not be included in our lives.” We make these choices where we work, where we live, where we worship.

Radical hospitality is an especially important practice for religious communities like ours. A fair question for each religious community, each congregation, is how radically hospitable are you? How do visitors feel when they walk in the door? Do people feel they can be who they are? Do they feel safe to share their theology, their political viewpoints, their questions and answers about life?

We Unitarian Universalists like to think of ourselves as welcoming to all – no matter what. All of our congregations proclaim something similar to the words that begin each service at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego that Tom Owen-Towle, their former minister, shares in his book *Growing a Beloved Community*: “Welcome, one and all, to our Unitarian Universalist religious community. We welcome you, whoever you are, whatever tradition, gender, race, sexual orientation, or age you represent.” I am sure the San Diego church really believes these words, I know that we believe them when we say them here as well. They are ideals that we wish to embody with all our hearts. But as much as we say how much we welcome everyone, we have the same struggles in practicing radical hospitality as any other religious community.

I have visited about fifteen to twenty Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country since I became a UU. At almost all of them words were said from the pulpit and in the order of service that proclaimed how glad they were to have me there on Sunday morning. But my experience has almost always been different than the words. In all the congregations I have visited only one gave me what I consider a truly welcoming, hospitable, greeting. Only once I have felt that my presence was really important, really valued in that congregation. In fact most of the time my presence wasn’t even acknowledged, and nobody even talked to me, including one congregation where I had been working for a week!

That is why it is so important to me that I greet everyone who walks in our front door each Sunday morning. That is why I cringe whenever I see someone, whether they are here for the first time or the three

hundred and first time, all alone during coffee hour. I can understand if people chose to leave us because our pluralistic theologies don't resonate with them or because they don't like my preaching but I hope they don't leave because we haven't shown them that care that they are here.

The Quaker author Parker Palmer writes about the challenges religious communities – *all* religious communities - have with practicing radical hospitality, “I have argued that the church, picturing itself as a close and warm family, tends to suppress conflict, depriving its members of a vital lesson in public life. That same familial image undermines the public life in another way – by excluding the stranger from its midst. If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit, and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are aimed at making the stranger “one of us.” The essence of hospitality – and of the public life – is that we let our differences, our mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them.”

Palmer speaks to what I believe is the number one challenge congregations, and more importantly the people who come to those congregations, have in practicing radical hospitality – our fear of difference. When I look at the world today I see we are not embracing and expanding difference but instead are withdrawing into more sameness. Sunday morning worship hour is still called the most segregated hour in the country because people usually chose to worship with people just like them. More and more subdivisions and gated communities are being created where people can live with people just like them. People are moving away from the diversity and difference that often comes with urban living so that they can avoid the homeless, avoid the “bad” parts of town and live more safely, more securely. But what is the price we pay for cocooning ourselves away from difference, away from opportunities to practice radical hospitality? As we lock our homes behind real or metaphorical gates, our hearts are soon to follow. And radical hospitality requires one thing more than any other – an open, not a closed heart.

As Father Dan writes, “Hospitality requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to

stretch myself open to the world and this opening of my heart could change everything. That's pretty frightening stuff. You can't ever be the same if you start doing this kind of thing."

You can't ever be the same if you start doing this kind of thing. Strong words that either excite you or scare the hell out of you. Or maybe a little of both.

How can we open our hearts wide to everyone we meet? How can we welcome the stranger, the person who is different than us, in a way that transforms not only our lives but also theirs'?

Father Dan says "Benedict is a realist about loving. He knows love comes only through effort and practice. It is costly. It is fatiguing. It is not some warm, fuzzy feeling Benedict wants us to conjure up; he wants the strength of respect and reverence to beat in the hearts of his monks."

I may not have a great definition for radical hospitality but I know what it looks like and feels like – unconditional love. I have felt unconditional love – radical hospitality- when I walked into my first 12 step meeting. When our next door neighbors Mr. and Mrs Shields invited me into their home when I was seven to play cards and watch baseball games with them on Saturday morning. I yearn to give unconditional love not only to those closest to me and everyone who walks up the path to this Fellowship but to everyone I meet. Unconditional love is a great theory but it sure is hard to live, it sure is hard work. It is costly. It is fatiguing and it happens very rarely, at least that's been my experience.

That is why I was so excited to read about David Roche, in Anne Lamott's book *Plan B Further Thoughts on Faith*. David is the monologist and pastor of the Church of 80% Sincerity and he knows a thing or two about radical hospitality and unconditional love. David was born with a huge benign tumor on his face. When surgeons tried to remove it, they removed his lower lip. The lower part of his face stopped growing and he was covered with plum-colored burns. He is in his late fifties now and his facial deformities are so bad that people often turn away from him when they first see him. David spends his time these days doing comedy, speaking with children and anyone he can about what it's like to live with a face that is deformed and what he has learned from it.

He tells people. "We with facial deformities are children of the dark. Our shadow is on the outside. And we can see in the dark; we can see you, we see you turn away, but one day we finally understand that you turn away not from our own faces but from your own fears. From those things that you think mark you as someone unlovable to your family, and society, and even to God."

It sounds like David knows why it is so hard for us to practice radical hospitality. He also knows about unconditional love and how we might learn to share it with those around us more often. Anne Lamott writes: "When David insists you are fine exactly the way you are, you find yourself almost believing him. When he talks about unconditional love, he gives you a new lease on life, because the way he explains it, you may, for the first time believe that even you could taste of this. As he explains it, in the Church of 80% Sincerity, everyone has come to understand that unconditional love is a reality, but with a shelf life of about eight to ten seconds. Instead of beating yourself up because you feel it only fleetingly, you should savor those moments when it appears. As David puts it, "We might say to our beloved, "Honey, I've been having these feelings of unconditional love for you for the last eight to ten seconds. Or "Darling, I'll love you til the very end of dinner."

So all I am asking for this morning is for 80% sincerity and 8-10 seconds of unconditional love. An open heart would help as would a willingness to overcome our fears and reach out to someone new, someone different. And maybe one day when someone asks where we come from we can say a place where everyone is kind and loving and nobody knows what it means to be a stranger. A place where everyone lived like John. May it be so. Amen.