

Smoky Mountain Reflections #168

It is often difficult for us to be good hosts. When others are in our home, we sometimes act differently or become a bit self-conscious about little things that we normally overlook. The same thing can occur in church; in many congregations, guests are only an occasional occurrence, so a number of awkward behaviors sometimes surface. For example, the rude look shot at someone sitting in “MY” pew, the expectation for a stranger to know that we “have always done it that way” here, and of course, the overly friendly crowd pouncing on a new face in a way that would drive even the most confident person to hyperventilation and a mild panic attack. Here at St. Paul, we rarely have a Sunday without a guest; 80% of the time they are vacationing Lutherans, but regardless, this reality keeps us on our toes, always seeking to be good hosts.

So what is a congregation to do? How should we treat our guests? I prefer the word guest because that is what they are; would you call someone who came to your home a visitor or a guest? This is of course a simple word preference issue, but I do believe that the word “guest”, in a way, lifts the bar regarding our behavior. One of the first things we often do in answering these questions is to confuse our priorities. Oftentimes, we base our actions on a man-centered approach, like a marketing strategy. There are two problems here: first, we as Christians gather to receive God’s gifts to us and focus on our savior, not ourselves. Second, we are faced with the reality that we are not able to please everyone; what is appealing to one guest can be offensive to another and vice-versa.

Let’s examine a few pitfalls of man-centered greeting practices. In my youth and early adulthood I was a guest in many worship services because my family moved often. In my early days it was a common practice to ask guests to stand and introduce themselves. While this was a great way to greet people in the 60s through the 80s, to make such a suggestion today sends chills of fear down the spines of some. I have heard people speak of not visiting churches due to their fear of this practice. On the flip-side, a church may try not to call attention to the new face for fear of scaring them off, but to the point that the guest feels ignored and wonders why everyone at that church is so cold and unfriendly. There are, however, some people who would like to quietly enter and exit church unseen because they dislike interacting with crowds and strangers. In their cases, greeting someone to make them feel welcome could be seen as *too* friendly, and I have even heard that said about a congregation that I was once a member of! Besides all of these, there is also that messy practice in most of our churches of sharing the peace of the Lord... “Eeeewww that spreads germs! The next thing you know we will all be in the hospital!” In my youth, seeking to be a chivalrous gentleman, I held a door for a young woman only to be told in a not-so-kind tone, “I am capable of opening the door for myself, young man!” Unfortunately, if we base our actions on the changing desires of mankind’s sinfully schizophrenic appetite, we will only succeed in, as the saying goes “pleasing some of the people some of the time”.

However, if we base our actions on a biblical strategy, of loving God and our neighbor in accord with His word, we are always guaranteed to at least please God. That is, of course, if we succeed in treating others as He would have us treat them; with love and respect, with the motive of fellowship and the sharing of His truth. So, regardless of how the world responds to your attempts at being kind and loving, you can always take comfort in remaining faithful to loving God and neighbor in accord with His will.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier