

“Disruptive Generosity and Radical Hospitality”

Sermon from Matthew 25:31-40

Given Sunday, April 26, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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“At the appointed time the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left.

The ruler will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then these just will ask, ‘When did we see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’

The ruler will answer them, ‘The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.’”

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Think about a time when you felt safe as a kid. That was the prompt at the dinner table one February evening, where people had come together to learn more about Safe Families for Children. Think about a time when you felt safe as a kid.

I stole that prompt for our worship service today – those of you on our email list were invited to set your space for this morning with something that reminds you of a time when you felt safe, nurtured, loved, or a picture or reminder of someone who has helped you feel that way. What did you bring? What’s the story it evokes for you?

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Oscar, my older kid, was born over a winter break when I was teaching at Ottawa University. I first brought him to campus when he was two weeks old. I went back to teaching as the semester started, and students took turns sitting with him in my office when I had to go to class: I’d nurse him right before and right after, and he’d usually make it ok through that time.

Beckett, my younger, was born three Mays later. I’d left teaching at the college by then, moved closer to where my parents and my in-laws lived. One set of grandparents took the boys every Monday; the other took them every Thursday.

Both boys were dedicated in the church we attended at that time. The pastor held each up high and the congregation recited vows to them, to surround them, and us, their parents, with care. That congregation makes good on those vows to this day.

My midwife for both boys' births was also my best friend. She coached me through delivering my babies and baked me casseroles, and sewed me a sling, and stitched me a quilt, and held my hand, and laughed and cried with me, and even had her own babies close to that same time, so they all had built-in best friends.

For a time, we lived with my grandmother. When the boys were young, they sat on her lap as she read to them. They learned the alphabet doing word searches with her. They built sprawling train tracks across her living room, and she was always impressed with them. She suffered from dementia, so each new track they built was not only the best she'd ever seen, but also, somehow, the first.

And I say all of that recognizing that it is a litany of privilege. I have just recited to you a small bit of the help my husband and I have had in raising our boys. We have been surrounded by support in every imaginable form – emotional and material and spiritual and communal. Our boys are loved by their parents and by more than just us, and they know it.

I asked Beckett yesterday where he felt safe, and he said, "At home. And at church. And at friends' houses. And at school. And at the

park...” And I think he just stopped because that was all the places he could think of. It was really heart-warming to hear that.

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All of that is blessing. All of that is happenstance and none of it is due to anything that I, or Rick and I, earned or deserved as parents, any more than any other parents. It is the luck of our lives.

And it is both gift and necessity. Because caring for other people – children, aging parents, ailing friends, strangers in need – caring for other people is both gift and necessity. You know this. It is delight and it is agony. And to do it alone is frightfully hard. Not impossible. But sometimes unbearable. And we do not have to ask each other to do that.

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Maybe you’ve heard this story: in 2003, in Chicago, a woman came to a psychologist running a foster care agency. She was distraught. She said to him: “I need you to take my children away from me.” He asked, as he was trained to do, “Have you hurt them?” She said, “No.” She said, “I’m asking you to take them because I fear that I might.” He said, “I can’t do anything unless, until, you harm them.” She broke down, left his office.

He went home from work that evening and told his wife. His wife told him, “Call that woman now. We will take her children.” And they did. They got help from their church family. They kept in close contact with the mom, encouraging her, facilitating her connection to her kids while she gained some strength back. And after a few weeks, she was healthier. More hopeful. Ready and able to take her children back into her home. The church family that had surrounded the psychologist and his wife when they hosted those kids also surrounded their mom when she took them back. And Safe Families for Children was born.

Safe Families envisions a world where children are safe and families transformed through radically compassionate communities. It exists to offer the kind of support I talked about earlier to all people raising children, so that no one has to do it alone.

There are more than one hundred chapters of Safe Families for Children, around this country and others, and since its founding Safe Families has facilitated more than 35,000 hostings for families experiencing crisis – crisis can look like illness, homelessness, domestic violence, incarceration, substance abuse treatment. The average length of a hosting is 45 days, and 93% of children are

reunited with their parents after the hosting event – but the relationship formed with the host family often continues, and is encouraged to; the host family becomes a part of the placing family’s extended network, that piece of support that was missing at the beginning.

Churches sign up to participate with Safe Families – we signed up officially with the Yamhill County chapter last year, and people from our congregation have said they’ll serve in various roles – as host families, as resource friends, as family coaches. Those volunteers constitute FBC’s Circle of Support, the name Safe Families gives to the folks who come together to care for the family experiencing crisis. Vicki Cartwright is our ministry lead, coordinating volunteers from here and First Presbyterian, across the street, and a few people from scattered other congregations.

When we were weighing whether or not FBC could sign on for this project – as a church, and not just as individual volunteers – the Missions Ministry Team, and the staff, and the Church Board, all kept coming back to the commitment we made as a church to orient ourselves around ministry as it’s expressed in Matthew 25.

That's what this is. Safe Families is a way to live out the commitments of that Scripture today. This ministry centers itself around two ideals: disruptive generosity and radical hospitality. Maybe the *generosity* and the *hospitality* are obvious: people open their homes, and their lives, to strangers. They join with them in the caring for children, in the raising of them. They share food, beds, toys, bikes, space. That much makes sense. But it's *disruptive* and it's *radical* because it challenges the notion of who belongs where, of how neatly and severely we draw those lines of where and what home is, and who and what a family is. Safe Families is a lived expression of the deepest truth and the most profound call in the verses we read for today, and that is: *we all belong to each other*. Or, as Hillary Clinton once put it, "There is no such thing as other people's children."

If we read today's scripture literally – which, of course, we aren't often inclined to do around here, but if we do – we might say, not only is there no such thing as other people's children, but there is always, only, Christ. Every kid in need. Every mom striving to make ends meet. Every dad in crisis. Every hungry baby, and every rambunctious toddler, and every frightened kid, and every lonely pre-teen, and every searching teenager, and every yearning elder, always, only, Christ.

But this scripture isn't just arguing we should reach out to one another because everybody, anybody, is Christ, and so somehow deserves help or care. The challenge goes deeper than that. This call to recognize each face in need as Christ is a way to say: this one you open your door to can minister to you, as Christ. This one you sit down to listen to can teach you, as Christ. This one you offer a safe night's lodging to, this one you promise a hot breakfast in the morning, this one whose hand you hold while they drift off to sleep is opening up your heart, as Christ.

Remember, we are only called to live for Christ after God enters our reality, lives and loves and dies in it, and then breaks free from the bonds of death. We first are recipients. With this call to recognize everyone as Christ, we're not being commanded to serve, or not only. We're being invited to receive. We're being nudged toward transformation. We're being reminded that a real encounter – where our vulnerability meets someone else's – where we offer love, and where we claim it – we're being reminded that *that* is salvation.

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At that dinner table that February night, where we were all asked to think about a time we felt safe as children, it was clear that the

question was harder for some people to answer than others. That basic human right of all people – the right to safety – just isn't universal. It just can't be assumed. Some around that table remembered a whole childhood of feeling safe, nurtured, loved. For other people, a specific instance, or person, stood out in contrast to a childhood that was otherwise less than stable, even traumatic. But those memories of safety were profound, even if they were momentary. Those memories of safety sustained those kids until they became the adults they were that evening, gathered around a table to talk about the possibility of opening their hearts and homes so other kids might have a safe place to be when another family finds itself in need and without supports.

Safe Families says even short stays – a couple of weeks, or just a couple of nights – in a safe and nurturing environment *builds possibilities* in the minds of children: maybe they learn new coping skills, or feel a greater sense of security in their body, or become more able to connect with people – those possibilities can change a child's brain, impact them for years to come.

I know in these days of pandemic, it can be hard to consider one more thing. To that, I'd say first – of course. Most everything about these days is difficult and exhausting and uncertain. We are, in this

moment, safest when we are isolating. This is not an ideal time to talk about expanding our notion of family, bringing people we don't know into our lives and homes. And families who were isolated and without supports before the pandemic hit find themselves even more isolated and in even greater need now. *And* even now, there are lots of ways to support the Safe Families movement, to live out the verses we heard this morning. One is through prayer. Pray for churches and their circles of support, pray for host families, pray for families placing their children into care, pray for the children. Another is through signing up to learn more. After worship today we'll invite you to tune in to a livestream event with volunteers telling their own stories of what it's been like, what it's meant to them, to have a role in this ministry. Another, if you are in a safe and stable environment, is to commit to finding a way to increase the feelings of safety and stability for others in need, whatever it is: you know there is need in our community; you know best what you can offer.

Friends, the good news is not only that Jesus came to live among us, to love us and to show us how to love, but that Christ keeps coming, yesterday and today and tomorrow, to keep deepening that love – our giving and our receiving of it. For all of the ways we've known love, for all of the ways we can share it, thanks be to God.