

**EVERYTHING IS READY!****The Six Signs Series: Radical Hospitality****Bruce Davis****St. Andrew's United Methodist Church****Omaha, Nebraska****November 18/19, 2017**

Before plunging in, let's read a verse from Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 15, verse 7: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the Glory of God." Amen.

Let's plunge:

My two favorite times of the sporting year are baseball season and baseball's off-season. I enjoyed the World Series well enough, but was glad when it was over, so the Cardinals could get to work finding a power bat for the middle of their lineup.

Not that the recently completed play-offs weren't interesting in their own right. It was a relief, of course, when the Cubs were eliminated. I have a goodly number of friends in this congregation who are Cubs fans and could hardly begrudge them one World Championship every 104 year. But the prospect of seeing the Small Bears repeat was entirely too much.

As to the World Series finalists, some of my favorite people in this congregation bleed Dodger blue; some of my favorite people in this congregation are Astros fans. I will confess, however, that I finally found myself kind of rooting for the Orange, largely because of my experience of welcome—or lack thereof—at Dodgers Stadium.

As of my August tour of five newly built ballparks on the east coast, I've attended games at each of the 32 extant Major League stadia. Unless the Cardinals are playing, I rarely pay much attention to the games. I'm more interested in the Fields of Dreams themselves, buying a cheap ticket, spending most of my time wandering around.

**In Atlanta, for instance, I particularly enjoyed the Braves Hall-of-Fame and its tribute to home-run king Hank Aaron. The Braves were not born in Atlanta; SunTrust Park celebrates the storied franchise through glory years in Milwaukee, back to the Braves of Boston. Likewise, it's always good for the church to remember where we come from: the apostolic line of succession back through 20 centuries of Christendom. The church's Hall of Fame is in heaven!**

**In Miami, I got to see future Cardinal Giancarlo Stanton (please Lord, make it happen) hit a ringing RBI double. Perhaps my favorite Marlins Park memory was the plantains. I developed a taste for plantains in multiple trips to Nicaragua; my mouth watered to see them available in the Marlins concession stands.**

**I'd been to the old Yankee Stadium a couple of times and wasn't sure what to expect from the new. Had they paved paradise? NO! This was great: The new Yankee Stadium is largely a recreation of the House that Ruth built, albeit with modern amenities. The monuments are still in center field, Derek Jeter added since I was here last. And the neighborhood itself is as it was; no glitz, just baseball.**

**I've often thought if I had a time machine, one of the stops would be long-demolished Ebbets Field, home of the Dodgers before they moved to L.A. Coming out of the subway in Queens, approaching CitiField, the Mets' architectural homage to old Ebbets raised goosebumps, the theme only reinforced entering the main gate into the Jackie Robinson Rotunda.**

**Perhaps the most memorable moment at Nationals Park was the Presidents Race. The presidential mascots are way cool: Teddy Roosevelt was way out in front at one point, only to get nipped at the finish line by Abraham Lincoln. When I came through the gate, into the ballpark, Abe had been among the greeters.**

In the course of my baseball travels, including ballparks long since torn down, I've been in one and only one where my cheap ticket didn't give me the run of the ballpark, that being Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. Having taken my assigned seat through the first inning, then ready to wander, I was astonished to be stopped by security. *You're not allowed beyond this point.* I tried to explain; I wasn't trying to go into the private boxes or anything like. I just wanted to see the ballpark from different vantage points. *No. Go back where you belong.* I thought that was pretty unfriendly, if you want to know the truth.

Chavez Ravine is one big parking lot, entered only after fighting the Los Angeles freeway traffic to get there. With a daughter in Orange County, I've had ample opportunity to return to Dodgers Stadium, but given previous experience, why would I?

In contrast, in multiple visits to the ballpark on Crawford Avenue in Houston, I'd found the place enormously fan-friendly, easily accessed, in a cool neighborhood, a great place to eat wings just across from the home plate entrance. I particularly enjoy spending a couple of innings standing right here, flush with left field. Even the cheap ticket guy feels welcome in this place. That sort of thing matters to me. Go 'Stros.

This is the final installment in our BEE THE CHURCH series, modeled around Bishop Robert Schnase's highly influential book: "Five Practices Of Fruitful Congregations."

The Five Practices:

- RADICAL HOSPITALITY
- PASSIONATE WORSHIP
- INTENTIONAL FAITH FORMATION
- RISK TAKING MISSION & SERVICE
- EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

As St. Andrew's hardly ever does anything in the order prescribed, we close this series with the first of Bishop Schnase's categories: "Radical Hospitality." Our text, The

**Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 22, starting at verse 1,  
The Parable of the Wedding Banquet:**

**Once more Jesus spoke to them (the varsity disciples) in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come.**

**Huh. Maybe there’s been a failure to communicate? I learned long ago, if you want your message to be heard, you got to get it front of folks multiple times. So, let’s try again:**

**“Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’**

**“Everything is ready!” My mind’s eye sees the table set just so, staff prepped on receiving the guests, meticulous attention to detail.**

**As a resource for what such a gathering may have entailed, we turn to the Old Testament Book of Amos. No one ever accused Amos of being a party guy, but he does give a sense of a BC banquet: (6:1, 4-7)**

**Alas for those who are at ease in Zion.... Who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; and drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!**

**While Amos may have taken a dim view of such proceedings, we know Jesus himself graced a wedding at Cana of Galilee, famously changing water into wine--this reported to have been the first of his miracles. Note the musicians in the Renaissance**

rendering. When I was in college, my rock and roll band would occasionally change into red dinner jackets with white shirts and black bow ties, to form the Larry Walton Combo. The eponymous Larry Walton fronted on trumpet, his combo frequenting the St. Louis wedding circuit.

I particularly enjoyed the Jewish weddings. The hosts were invariably generous with food and beverage. The reason Jesus changed water into wine in the first place was that the wedding guests in Cana had been imbibing in such quantities as to run out. Likewise, in my experience at Jewish weddings, our combo only needed about an hour's worth of material, as everyone was really happy by then, and as long as we could do a decent *Hava Nagila*, everything was going to be copacetic.

I imagine the guys in the band of Jesus' parable, their harps tuned, waiting for the guests to arrive. I'm supposing the officiating rabbi was on the scene. I was reminded again this week why I have personally distanced myself from officiating at 21<sup>st</sup> century weddings. Sheila Coleman had attended an exchange of nuptials over the weekend and posted this photo: Pancho the Beer Burro.

Full disclosure: I'm wired more like Amos than is commonly recognized. Per my Methodist heritage, I'd prefer Jesus had changed the wine into water and given a temperance talk. Or at least a message of moderation, "You've had enough already." But that's just me.

Back to the parable. The servants have gone forth to tell folks everything is ready and waiting. Come on in:

But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.

Bummer! I read of the servants in the parable and think of servants of Lord here at St. Andrew's, folks going to great

lengths, mostly behind the scenes, to make sure everything is ready for our weekly worship festivals.

For instance, one of the reasons the servants in the parable had to go door to door in the first place is that clocks didn't exist and start times were inexact at best. As such would hardly work in this information age, St. Andrew's is invested in electronic postings, including a recent updating of the church website, designed by one of our newest members, Andy Hughes. (That's his LinkedIn picture. If you're among the many who've invited me to LinkedIn, it's not that I'm ignoring you or being unfriendly; my computer needs updates to access it and I'm just plain outdated....) Andy put a lot of work into getting this ready, with the result that any looking for dates and times and other information relating to St. Andrew's need only click on the web site to find a full menu.

As much as I might like to think these messages are the main course at St. Andrew's, or perhaps the music, I've read that most first-time visitors make up their mind about a congregation within ten minutes of driving on to the lot.

Which is to say that landscaping (that's Al Faltys), parking, signage, the warmth of greeting or lack thereof, folks attuned to those who may be trying to find their way around, asking, "Can I help?"—all these and more make a huge difference in how guests experience the congregation. These things don't just "happen." We've got folks up here early on Sunday, putting on the coffee; Friday volunteers stuffing inserts into the bulletin (Debbie and Larry Lees recently enlisted Granddaughter Taylor). Food often figures in. This far north, we don't do plantains; we're into cinnamon rolls!

Our musicians and Praise Teams will have practiced on Wednesday night, up here again well before the services start to go over their songs; here's the choir getting ready for the upcoming Cantata. Likewise, our teachers will have prepared their lessons, the rooms arranged, so that everything is ready when the children arrive...

**A whole lot of effort went into getting ready for Trunk or Treat, indoors and out, but when you've got a thousand plus folks coming from the community, such preparation is well worth it. Even that, however, pales in comparison to the "getting ready" involved with our upcoming Live Nativity. I think we had two thousand people come through last year.**

**Imagine our level of disappointment if, after all the work that will go into getting ready for Live Nativity, no one showed.**

**So, back to the book. I'm trying to think of reasons folks might have had for blowing off the invitation. Two contrasting experiences come to mind, the first from when Nancy and I were in Springfield, Missouri.**

**My co-pastor was big on staff outings and on this occasion we were to have staff lunch at an eating establishment famous for the slogan: "When you're here, you're family." I had ridden to the restaurant with my beloved, but after the meal, walked out in conversation with our business manager, only to remember Nancy had parked on the other side of the building. So I walked that way, to find Nancy had already left.**

**No problem. I went back into the restaurant and explained I needed to call my office. The hostess directed me to a pay phone. I was in kind of a snippy mood by then, anyway, and reminded her that, per the slogan, I was family: Would you make family use a pay phone? From her response, I could only assume there was an unspoken part of the equation: When you're here, you're family, but once you step outside the door, you're dead to us.**

**To make a long story short, I wound up walking back to the office, along one of Springfield's busiest thoroughfares, until Nancy finally came looking for me. She seemed to think it was funny.**

**I offer that as a parable in its own right. I can imagine some looking at the church of our generations, assuming we're only interested in folks so long as they put money in the plate, or serve some other congregational self-interest. I hope not.**

**Per my experience at Dodger Stadium, I find myself wondering how often people perceive barriers here: you're**

welcome to a certain point in our congregational life, but no further. The thought is...troubling.

On the other end of the spectrum, Nancy and I were in Vermont, some years back, staying at a highly recommended country inn, offering not only bed and breakfast, but dinner service as well. I was looking forward to our evening repast, until the proprietor directed us to a table already taken by other people. Huh? You want us to sit with these folks?

I tried to quietly explain: I don't want to eat with these strangers. I don't want to talk with anyone besides Nancy, Give us a table for two. No, explained the proprietor, that's not how we do things around here. We're a friendly establishment—and you will be friendly.

Nancy is world-class when it comes to taking up with strangers; she had a fine time conversing with the nuns who were our table company. I did not. If and when we go back to Vermont, I don't know where we'll be staying, but it won't be this place.

What I'm trying to say: This hospitality thing can be tricky. As a social introvert, I can take just so much greeting. Before going into ministry, when attending congregations in college and then in my two wretched years with the telephone company, I would intentionally time my arrival for after the service started and then leave during the last hymn so as NOT to have to interact with anyone. I was just seeking sanctuary for my soul.

I am aware that the shake-and-howdy segment of these worship hours can be a turn-off to some, but look at it this way: I figure it's less painful than Passing the Peace. At least this way, there's no formal response required.

Though I should add this: On that same trip to Vermont, I went in town to worship at the old Methodist Church. This was kind of off-putting. I don't suppose there were more than twenty people in the service, but not a soul, including the pastor, so

much as acknowledged my presence. I don't need or want to be gushed over, but neither do I appreciate being ignored.

With that, I want to acknowledge those who've accepted our invitation to join St. Andrew's over the past twelve months. It's not necessarily among our largest groups, but I don't remember a class more engaged in our life together.

**Nick & Claudia Zoerb – Highly engaged: Sunday School & Ushering, VBS**

**Randy & Deb Stranberg – Part of the hospitality team, we've seen them in the choir.**

**Jason & Emily Stillman**

**Kristin Fisher—We saved her from Lutheranism.**

**Rogene Spanton – Our Chili Cookoff Champion**

**Derek & Jessica Williamsen**

**Jason & Nicole Ackermann—Nicole has served in the nursery.**

**Ganon & Michelle Van Dyke**

**Ron Bonnett – volunteered with Upward.**

**Corrine Bork – is a nursery helper.**

**Judi Peters – sang in my musical.**

**Andy & Lili Hughes – We talked about Andy and the website;**

**Lili's teaches in the Sunday School.**

**Earl & Amy Wright – ushering subs**

**Jon & Sara Westerlin – Sunday school and VBS**

**Martha Humphrey – Bible Studies**

**I'll take a break and let AJ introduce our 2017 Confirmands**

***Ashton Abdul, Alex Alvarez, Isabella Amato, Joe Bunz***

***Ella Buroker, Taylor Colvert, Coby Crawford, Kayla Cull***

***Lindsey Ellison, Emily Engel, Joey Falk, Jake Fox***

***Ashley Franzen, Olivia Gernhart, Danielle Hall, Logan Halley***

***Braeden Haptonstall, Bernice Hilker, Brooke Hultquist, Aevari***

***Kotil***

***Kyan Lodice, Luke Meisgeier, Tyler Myering, Aida Nelson***

**Deb Therkildsen – Greeting Team**

**Gene & Mary Welch – Men’s Ministry**

**Roger & Jane Schauss – Jane is on the Pastoral Care Team.  
Studies**

**Vicki Bryant – Health Ministries Team, Upward volunteer**

**Dave & Barb Mohrman--Dave has been engaged with our Habitat  
For Humanity.**

**Patty Corwin – Choir, musical**

**Mary Posan is Diane Wilson’s mother**

**Ralph & Gayle Bradley – choir, small groups**

**Andrew & Audrey Hoffman**

**Kellee Anderson**

**Sandra Simmons – Bible Studies**

**Jerry & Debbi Colvert**

**Todd & Tina Hatten**

**Robert & Addie Hollingsworth**

**Bryan & Kristina Skalberg – Welcome Table, Sunday School**

**Nathan & Ashley Mueller**

**Gregg & Laura Albus**

**Hank & Lynda Kessler - Musical**

**Take it AJ:**

***Jacob Neumann, Jack Neville, Mia Olson, Nico Orlich***

***Jessica Pafford, McKenna Pafford, Regan Peake***

***Logan Petersen***

***Sarah Rector, Caden Scott, Brady Shea, Karsten Simonsen***

***Nathan Webster, Johnny Weed. Olivia Wharton-Hunt,***

**Morgan Wiseman**

**Joe Bradley, Brad & Pam Nygren – will be hosting one of our new Interest Groups!**  
**Roger & Megan Ray**

**Clint Clark – Musical, most recent BINGO caller**  
**Bob & Judy Stubblefield**  
**Geir & Lori Simonson**

**Matt & Laramie Chrisman**  
**Wes & Maybell Galusha**  
**Michael & Jeannie Gallagher – will be hosting one of our new Interest Groups!**

These are great folks and I am **WAY PROUD** to be their pastor. Still, there's a tinge of regret, thinking of others who might have come, but didn't, me wondering what we might have done differently—what I might have done differently—to bring them in our festivities.

The host of Jesus' parable was engaged in no such introspection:

The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast is an eschatological teaching—as in final judgement. For those of us into Jesus Meek and Mild, the verse just read may be sound harsh to the point of alienating. Mainline Protestants these days prefer this more gentle sentiment, a lyric sung often around here:

Someday every tongue will confess you are God  
 Someday every knee will bow  
 Still the greatest treasures remain for those  
 Who gladly choose him now.

Fine by me. That said, I can imagine Matthew hearing the verse and thinking it sounds suspiciously like universal salvation. He would likely tweak the lyric:

Someday every tongue will confess you are God

**Someday every knee shall bow  
Those who reject Christ are destined to wrath  
So it behooves us to choose Him now.**

**Not that I pretend to understand how such things work, myself, but I'm just telling you how I read Matthew's account. And Mark's and Luke's and John's. Back to the book:**

**"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests."**

**Just over a year ago, Nancy and I were on one of these Danube River cruises. Our guide got quasi-teary, sharing film clips from a German-language movie, "Sissi": the trials and tribulations of a simple girl from Bavaria, chosen by Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria, to be his bride, making her Empress Elizabeth of Austria.**

**Anyway, Nancy and I were looking at TCM last month and saw "Sissi" was available OnDemand. Turns out, there are three Sissi films, released in 1955, '56 & '57; in the third installment, the young empress has survived a life-threatening illness and courageously joined her husband on a goodwill tour of northern Italy. The Italians have little in the way of goodwill for the Austrians. When Sissi invites the Italian aristocracy to a ball, the snobs collectively decide to insult her, sending their servants—illiterate peasants—in their place. Aren't we clever!**

**Sissi is utterly unfazed. The Marques of Snootine has sent a footservant in her place? Great! Sissi greets the footservant as the Marques of Snootine, affording all who have come with great dignity. This gets back to the nobility. The party had gone on without them. Worse, Sissi is said to have confused the snobs with their servants! They chastened aristocrats resolve to go to the empresses' next party: But there's not going to be a next**

party. That ship has done sailed—and they have missed the boat.

If the idea that those who reject Christ’s invitation might find themselves excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven troubles you, the parable ends with a still more problematic passage:

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

No one ever accused me of being a clothes horse. I’m into “Come as you are” Christian expression. The idea of excluding someone because maybe they couldn’t afford a fancy robe is troubling at best. However.

One of the reasons a servant could go into the streets and fields and invite folks to drop what they were doing and come to the party was this: Upon entering the premises, they would be handed a wedding robe, provided by the host. Slip in on, you’re ready to go.

The flip side of that being, if a person was in attendance without the robe, it could only be a matter of studied insult to the host. So, we end with a reading from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, chapter 3, starting at verse 12:

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, with which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in

**all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

**That's how fruitful people in fruitful congregations clothe themselves. It's as close as we have to a dress code around here!**

**With that, we're ready to bring the pledge cards. Come, Ye Thankful People, Come!**

**BRD**