

“Deep Community and Beautiful Hospitality”

Reading: Psalm 133; Judges 21

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There are some people who refuse to watch any R-rated movies, and I understand their logic. A lot of R-rated movies are being needlessly provocative. But then I think that those people had better hope that no one makes a movie out of the Bible, because there are a lot of stories in here that are well into R-rated territory. The Bible is not safe or sanitized. It is not always comforting. It does not fit neatly into labeled categories, because it tells stories about people who need God, and you and I both know that people who need God — which would be all of us, by my count — don't fit neatly into labeled categories. Some Bible stories are not nice Bible stories. Some of them are just plain ugly.

The book of Judges is just plain ugly. There are some good things in there, but they are overshadowed by events so bad that even telling the story leaves a bad taste in your mouth. And that's the point, really. The epitaph of the book is there at the end of what we read, as the very last words of the book: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.” And just to make sure we get it, those words are woven throughout the entire book like a refrain. They had no king. They did what they wanted. And it was ugly. You cannot read the book of Judges and be optimistic about human nature left to its own devices.

The chapter that we read is just the end part of a longer story, and as bad as chapter 21 is, in fact we skipped over the worst parts. If you go back to the beginning of chapter 19, the story starts with those words: “In those days Israel had no king;” that reminder that everyone was left to their own devices. And it tells the story of a man from the tribe of Levi who had a concubine, a woman he kept for his own pleasure, but this woman who is not given the dignity of any identification other than being a concubine escapes and returns to her family's home. The Levite goes and collects her from her family, and they begin the journey back to the Levite's home. There were cultural reasons at the time explaining these practices somewhat, but let's call this what it is: this is sex trafficking.

This is an appalling story. While they're on their way back to the Levite's home, they stop for the night in a town called Gibeah, which was in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. That night, the people of the town try to sexually attack the Levite, which along with the crime of rape would have grossly violated the traditions of hospitality to strangers. So the Levite and his host give the Levite's concubine to the mob instead, and she is sexually abused throughout the night and left for dead in the doorway in the morning. The Levite takes her body home and sends pieces of her body to the other tribes of Israel to act as a rallying cry for revenge on the tribe of Benjamin. In the civil war that followed, more than 65,000 soldiers were killed, and then the avenging Israelites rampaged through the territory of the Benjamites, burning towns and killing every living thing. That all happens *before* we get to the horrible story we read in chapter 21.

As further punishment, the Israelites make a vow not to allow their daughters to marry any Benjamite men, which effectively meant that the Benjamites would eventually die out. But the Israelites feel bad about this, so they concoct a scheme to get wives for the Benjamites without breaking their vow. They attack one of their own towns and abduct all the single women there, and then they conspire to have the Benjamites attack a festival in another town to abduct the women

there, too. So this story that begins with the appalling rape of one woman ends with the rape of hundreds of women, with a civil war with all its atrocities in the middle.

In those days they had no king; they did as they saw fit. These people were so far fallen that the most righteous courses of action they could come up with are almost unspeakably evil. Their king should have been God, but they had no king. And so we have the chosen people of God unable to connect with God because of their selfishness, and therefore they can't connect with one another, and therefore they can't connect with others, either. Their relationship with God was broken, which meant that their community was broken, which also meant that their sense of hospitality toward others was broken. In this story, losing sight of God leads to a breakdown of hospitality toward strangers, which leads to a breakdown of the community through civil war. It is literally one of the lowest, darkest points in the entire biblical history.

There are lots of places in this story where we could point out the effects of sin, but it's that breakdown of community and hospitality that is catching us today. A big reason for that comes in the story that follows the book of Judges. The story of Ruth takes place during that time, and it is as beautiful as Judges is ugly. They're placed side by side to contrast one another. Where Judges tells of broken community, Ruth tells of redeemed community. Where Judges tells of violated hospitality, Ruth tells of beautiful hospitality. Ruth is a vulnerable and destitute foreigner who immigrates to Israel during this time, and rather than being taken advantage of or ignored, she is redeemed, bought back, from her desperation by a man named Boaz, who becomes her husband, and Ruth is invited into the lineage that will give rise to King David and the dynasty of kings who follow him, and eventually Jesus Himself.

Failing to embrace deep community and beautiful hospitality leads to the brutal dehumanization of others. It's taken to an extreme in our story from Judges, where a woman is stripped of her personhood and reduced to nothing more than a tool for sexual gratification, power politics, and tribal honor. It's seen to a lesser degree in our own lives, where people are valued for how much work we can get out of them or how many products we can sell them. That might not seem dehumanizing until you think about the toll it takes: people get downsized, or swindled, or ignored, or their employers find ways of abusing the letter of the law to abuse their employees. People on the wrong side of an ocean find themselves judged unworthy of living anywhere but a toxic waste dump made with refuse from faraway lands. Poor workers harvesting chocolate or coffee or diamonds live like slaves because of economic forces beyond their control.

Obviously, we are called to something better than the broken community and violated hospitality that is on display in the book of Judges, and is on display in our nation right now. The people of God are called to be the *people* of God, not just *persons* of God. Jesus said that the most important commandment is to love God, but the second commandment is like it: love others. As we draw near to God, we are called into authentic community. Living the Christian life means more than just living as a Christian who knows God and follows the rules, it means living in the community of God's people. The Christian life was not meant to be lived in isolation. Some people are extroverts; they thrive in a crowd. But a crowd is not community. And some people, like me, are introverts; they thrive in isolation. But isolation, obviously, is not community. True community is something deeper than just being together; it stretches us, whether you're an extrovert or an introvert. It means sharing life together, bearing with one another, building a common relationship founded on Christ. It means

giving a person a place, humanizing them by judging them worthy of space and attention and time. It means showing someone that I do not care about them merely for what I can get out of them or what they can do for me. In a world in which we are all used to being advertised to constantly, where we're used to being treated as nothing more than a source of profit, this sort of community is a powerful witness.

What does that community look like? Well, let's talk first of all about what the church is. There are lots of ways we could define the church, but today let's focus on three things: what sets the church apart is that we are the redeemed, gathered, sent people of God. If you don't have people who have been bought back from sin and death by the blood of Christ, you don't have the church. If you don't have those people gathered in the name of Christ, you don't have the church. One Christian is not the church. And if those gathered people are not motivated in the mission of the kingdom of God, they are not being the church.

So that means two things: that we ought to have deep community together, and that we ought to be beautifully hospitable. Those two ideas are linked; the one flows right out of the other. Deep community means more than just sitting in a room together for an hour once a week. It means that we are brothers and sisters in the name of Jesus Christ the risen Lord. It means that each one of us has been redeemed by the blood of Christ; at some point in our lives we have heard someone say to us that we are living as though we are worthless, when we should be living as though we are priceless, because the King of all creation gave His life for us. And as redeemed people, we have a common bond that no one else can know. Not one of us deserves to be here, and yet Christ made a way for us and He is changing us now and for eternity. And so we are bound together as redeemed people gathered in His name.

We're family. We might be one of the strangest families around, but that's what we are. My prayer for this church is not that we would grow to become the biggest and coolest church around. Honestly, it's not necessarily my goal to add numbers to our Sunday attendance. What I would rather have is for us to look around this sanctuary one day and think, "How on earth did *that guy* become my brother?" I want us to be the biggest collection of misfits, messes, and failures around. I don't want a church full of church people, I want a church full of people who could never possibly deserve to be here, and they know it, and they're grateful that Christ has bought them back from the brink. I want a church full of people who are so radically different from one another that we can't possibly get along, much less love one another, and the only thing we have going for us is that we're one in Christ's name, and that's all it takes for us to be family. And I want the world to look at us and be so amazed that such a bizarre assortment of people have built a community together that they can't help but know that we had help from above.

That's deep community. And if we're deep in our community, we will be beautiful in our hospitality. If I am aware of how our community is created only by the grace of God, and if I remember that I have been redeemed from hell only by Christ's blood, then I will naturally reach out in love even to those who are different than me, even those who are strangers, even those I do not understand. Having people over for a party is not necessarily hospitality. We can be a very friendly church and not be hospitable. Just saying hello to guests and welcoming them to our worship today is not being hospitable. Hopefully you've experienced true hospitality, because it's a beautiful thing. It

happens when a stranger comes into our midst and we give them a place, and they go from being a stranger to being a friend.

It's like when you have a guest stay with you, and you tell them to "make yourself at home." It's a little thing, and yet it's a way of taking the time to tell your guest that they have a place here with you. It doesn't mean that the guest takes over the house, and it doesn't mean that we become something we aren't, but it means that we are vulnerable enough and caring enough to tell our guest that they have a place among us, and so we will make room for them. We need to be deep enough in our community to be beautiful in our hospitality, because we need to be secure enough in who we are not to be threatened by giving our guests a place and inviting them into the community.

Community and hospitality take intentionality; they don't just happen. They are profoundly spiritual practices, because the Bible makes it abundantly clear that how we treat and relate to others has a massive impact on how we relate to God. And so if it is your desire to become a deep, beautiful, fearless person of Jesus Christ, think about your engagement with this community of faith. Think about your practice of hospitality toward those outside this community of faith. Maybe you need to go out of your way to get to know someone you haven't spoken to yet. Maybe you need to invite someone over for coffee just to chat. Maybe you need to be deliberate in reaching out in love to tell someone who is different than you that they are priceless in the eyes of God, and there is redemption waiting for them. Maybe we as a church need to think about how we do community and hospitality, and be deliberate about making room for guests, rather than making them feel like they're intruding in our space. How can you embody the hospitality of the God who welcomed you into His family? We are the redeemed, gathered, sent people of God; let's act like it.



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