

## ***Nagging Not Welcome Here***

1 Peter 4:7-11

April 2, 2017

Rev. Dr. John Suk

A few years ago, I wrote a blogpost for our church's website. I titled it, "Twenty-one reasons to come to my church."

The column is just a bit tongue-in-cheek. Among the reasons not to give up on our church, I suggested the following.

**One:** Yes, we think there is a gay agenda, and we're for it. Gay—or trans, or bi, or whatever—all sexual orientations are definitely welcome at our shop.

**Two:** Not married? Living together? Nice. Welcome.

**Seven:** A lot of people at LPCC are pretty well-to-do. I don't criticize them for being capitalists and then go ask them for money when we need it. Our well-to-do members, after all, are trying to figure out how to be authentically Christian just like everyone else. They merely have their own unique challenges. No need to scapegoat them for that.

**Eight:** A lot of people at LPCC are barely getting by from paycheque to paycheque. Life in Toronto is expensive. We don't hound such people about tithing or anything like that.

And so on. What you will notice about the reasons for not giving up on LPCC is that we aim to be a hospitable place. Our big tent church is a cross-section of our society. We are old and young, Anglo and not, theologically Evangelical or Liberal or not sure. Some of us are athletic, some of us are intellectual, some of us are political—and some of us are all three. We support causes that embrace Muslims, refugees, the poor, and single mothers. Today's second collection is for Camp Scugog, in fact. Every summer it has a few weeks of camping especially for single mothers who would otherwise not be able to get out of the city in order to enjoy some vacation time with their kids. This month we aim to raise ten thousand dollars to build Scugog campers a new cabin. Rotary Toronto has pledged a similar amount.

And visitors get it that we're hospitable. A few weeks ago, a church consultant we brought in to talk about amalgamation joined us for worship the next day. His name was David Raymond, from Minneapolis. His comment after watching our pre-church coffee hour, after church coffee hour, and talking to many of our members, and looking through our bulletin and website and Friday update was something like, "wow, the energy here is really, really great. Friendly. People are looking for visitors. If this church was in my city, you'd have way more members than you do here."

So good on you. Congratulations LPCC. Keep it up. You are amazing. You are a friendly, hospitable congregation—off the charts, actually.

Of course, now that I've said so, you're probably all waiting for my big "but . . ." And of course, there is one. It goes like this. "We are hospitable . . . but . . . we need to build on this strength."

I'm loathe to add this "but." I don't want to be a nag, you see. And yet . . . well, Irene and I had this experience, recently, that justifies a bit of nagging.

We went sailing off the coast of Grenada, in the Caribbean. We flew to St. George's, Grenada's capital, and boarded a forty-four foot sailing boat there. Besides Irene and I, two novice sailors from New York City were on the boat with us. And there was an instructor. Captain Jamie is a young woman who has lived on her own boat for her whole adult life.

Right off, Captain Jamie seemed nice. She reminded me of my own kids. But, my goodness, Irene and I soon learned that she cracked the whip. She nagged us, from sun up to sun down, every day, endlessly.

Crank that winch! *Faster!* Watch your fingers. Two turns, *two*. TWO NOT THREE!

Jibe! Unfurl. Tack. Windward, WINDWARD!

Unfurl. Walk low. Grab that sheet. *Pull!* Starboard! STARBOARD. Lift that anchor. Release the vang.

Nag. Nag. Nag.

And so it went. Every day, each hour. And it reminded me of how I sometimes feel about preaching, in church.

You see, we're a liberal congregation. That means that while we might be curious about theological distinctives, we don't ram them down anyone's throats. But as a liberal congregation we tend to focus on the good things we can do to make a Jesus-sized difference in our world—the good things we can do rather than the doctrines we believe.

So I—like many United Church pastors—tell you what to do. Seek social justice. Fight climate change. Support Camp Scugog. Condemn Israel's military occupation of the West Bank. Help us make our budget. And getting back to the list I started the sermon off with, I've said we should welcome people of every sexual orientation, people who live together but are not married, rich people and poor people too. Saying so sometimes makes me feel like a Captain-Jamie-grade nag.

The flip side of her nagging, though, was a great adventure. Once we had the hang of it, and as long as we listened carefully to her instructions, Irene and I had a blast. Moving at eight or nine knots through the water, with one side of the deck skimming just over the surface; crossing an angry patch of ocean with eight-foot waves, the front of the boat actually dipping under the water with each wave; tacking into the wind without losing momentum; catching deep sea tuna, doing man-over-board stop

and starts, the sunsets, the after sail glass of wine with new friends—it was a great adventure. Maybe Irene and I will retire on a boat. But we figured the adventure out, in part, because of Captain Jamie's nagging.

And that is how I think of my "yes, but," today—Yes, congratulations on being a welcoming church **but** we have to build on this strength. For us to have an adventure, we need—not nagging, perhaps—but consistent instruction and encouragement if we want to make LPCC everything it can be, a church where everyone in all their diversity is actually here.

You see, in a lonely, competitive, and dangerous world, hospitality is a foundational religious duty in scripture. Scripture demands that the Jews be hospitable to strangers, because after all, the Jews were strangers once too, as slaves in Egypt. We don't want economic migrants to Canada to be like the slaves Israelites were in Egypt. According to an Old Testament story, under the Oaks of Mamre, Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers from heaven by slaughtering a fatted calf for them. They turned out to be angels. Boaz opened his fields and his home to the foreigner Ruth, and they became grandparents of King David. Rahab hid Israel's spies in Jericho. Hospitality is a key theme in the Old Testament . . .

And in the new. Our text from 1 Peter demands that we show the same kind of hospitality to our guests that the Israelites were supposed to show to their guests. In different places Paul demands hospitality of the Romans, of all church leaders, and widows. In Hebrews we read that we must not forget "to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." The epistle of 3 John, John writes to thank Gaius for the hospitality Gaius showed to Christian strangers who dropped in on him. Jesus himself, speaking says of his sheep, "take your inheritance . . . for I was a stranger and you invited me in.

I don't want to nag—especially when we've come so far. I don't want anyone here to leave the sanctuary feeling as if they don't get credit for how well they're doing. You are doing great, especially when it comes to hospitality.

But—there is that word again—I'd love for our hospitality to evolve into an invigorating and shared adventure that we'd like to live now and retire to. Maybe it is time to not merely say we welcome gays—as on my blogpost—but instead we actually go through the rather onerous process of actually becoming an affirming church. Maybe it is time to not only say that we are young and old, but to design new worship experiences that appeal more and more to a younger demographic. Maybe it's time for us to become more intentional and consistent not only about being nice to people who show up, but actually inviting them—our neighbours, friends, and relatives—to come in the first place. In fact, I don't actually think "maybe it's time," is the right way to put it. At the risk of sounding like a nag, I'm saying now is exactly the time for us to go the next step. After all, there is no reason that every step of our journey together can't be an adventure in radical hospitality.