

All are Welcome

Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 15:10-28

Slide: Pacific Lutheran

Some of you here may know that last fall, Jim and I were ecstatic when our nephew Jeffrey told us that he would be attending our Alma Mater Pacific Lutheran University. He just finished up his freshman year and begins his sophomore year in just a few weeks. It's been awesome to relive some of those memories of my college days vicariously through him this year. And, so when I was reading the texts for this appointed Sunday, a memory immediately popped back to just before the pandemic when I attended the Choir of the West reunion at my Alma Mater Pacific Lutheran.

A friend of mine, also an alum from my class, was at that time the organist for the local Lutheran church nearby, and since I was already in town, he invited me to participate to sing at a worship service that Sunday. Now, this is where it gets awkward. The few of us invited to sing were guests at this church; honored guests, but nonetheless, visitors. None of us had ever sung in that choir nor were active members of that church, so that day, we essentially were outsiders. Sometimes when I find myself in this position, I am welcomed and other times, I am not.

Slide: Alone in Church

When I first got there, I was told to sit anywhere in the first row by the director. Being that I actually was the first to sit down, I was the only one seated. A few minutes later, a woman who was obviously an insider to the congregation came in, looked at the first row (where I was the only one seated) and said, "Well, now where am I going to sit?" And, after looking around and seeing about three chairs empty on each side of me, it became apparent to me that I was in her chair. I had been invited to sit anywhere in the front by the director, but apparently there were unspoken rules about where I was really welcome to be. Once it was determined that I was friendly and obliging, the woman who seemed to feel imposed upon was very nice afterwards, and I'm sure she is a nice person, but it was already too late for me to feel welcome there.

Another thing I observed was that a friend of mine, who also had been invited to the service to sing, did not know that if being catholic meant she could come to communion or not. She said to me afterwards that she didn't understand what she was supposed to do during that time. Was she welcome as a visitor or did she have to be a Lutheran? She also felt awkward about going forward, since she was unsure if she could...so she didn't. I was very much unaware of her feeling that way because I was in the 'know' as an ELCA Lutheran. I automatically knew I was welcome at the table and so was she.

Both of us had moments of feeling uncomfortable that morning at a church that was not ours. And, neither of us felt good about that, even though I knew that that was not representative of the whole congregation, nor were we actually meant to be made uncomfortable. But, for a brief time, we were both outsiders even though I'm certain that was never the intention of the people of that congregation. Still, today for some people, that is enough for them to never come back again.

As an ordained minister in a church I have served at for some time now, I sometimes have to hit myself on the head to remind myself that people may not always know what our regular practices are. I want all people to feel welcomed AND all people are welcome at the table. As Rev. Sandee Kosmo said last week in her announcements very succinctly, this is an open table here. If Christ calls you to the table, come. We will all work out the basics of how to get a cup together.

Slide: Discomfort

Do you remember the last time you felt uncomfortable because you didn't fully understand what your role was or you didn't know the people, or you were unsure what your responsibility was? Sure, you have. We all have. We know what it's like to feel like a fish out of water and we often do all we can to avoid that feeling. So, just imagine for one second, if a person feels uncomfortable about trying something new or doing something out of their comfort zone, or more importantly, they are attempting to enter into a situation as an outsider, wouldn't you think they would do anything to not feel that way...the natural conclusion to that then is to avoid the discomfort, it's easiest not to risk the discomfort.

Advocating for ourselves, being assertive, and to enter into becoming an insider for anything, well...that takes guts. It takes bravery to become comfortable and accepting with discomfort.

Slide: The Canaanite Woman

The Bible readings for today make it clear that everyone, whether a foreigner, stranger, or Canaanite woman, are all welcome to partake of God's love and mercy, because God says they are. In fact, in the Isaiah reading, no one, even foreigners, which in those ancient days would have been an amazing thing to proclaim, not even foreigners are to be hindered from the fellowship. So, no one will be left out. And, then, the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew for today's reading observe how Jesus even lets a Canaanite woman, the quintessential outsider of those days, to be included as one of "great faith" to follow Jesus.

In fact, it's clear she has more faith than they do. Now, of course, give this woman credit. Think of the bravery she had to have to approach Jesus and ask for help. As a foreigner, an outsider, one who was not a Jew, she reminds Jesus of all that stuff he just said about "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart?" It's clear that Matthew put these two stories together so that we could better understand that Jesus is called to bring salvation to more than Jews, but all people, even Canaanite women, the lowest of the low in society. Even Jesus got a good reminder of what he just preached.

Yes, as we see, the disciples don't understand. They don't understand because they are insiders. Not only are they insiders as disciples of Jesus, as Israelites, the people of Abraham and Isaac, who were brought into a promised Land by Moses, that heritage means to them that they are the only ones chosen. And, Matthew uses them as examples on a regular basis. This is true here, too in this reading. So, they likely think they know who is in and who is out...and to them, the insiders, there are definitely outsiders. Not only that, maybe they even thought they could decide who's in and out. This woman is a nuisance. Get rid of her already.

Listen to how Jim Boyce his recent commentary on this text dramatically describes this scene:

“Gathered in one corner are those familiar disciples, for Matthew the true blue representatives of the faithful lost sheep of Israel, now leaping in into the fray like so many ravenous beasts, as if they were self-styled guarantors of the holy tradition, on their guard lest the mercies of God be wasted on the unworthy. Like a gang of watchdogs at the side of the gate stands this outsider, a woman no less, one lone representative of the dogs of religion, now become as it were a lost sheep plaintively pleading for the mercy of the master shepherd. No English translation can capture Matthew’s careful orchestration of the painful choral refrain: Lord, have mercy, the dog’s solo bleating cry. “Get rid of her,” the Lost-sheep chorus barks back in reply...”

It’s a common problem even today though, right? The human tendency is to place people in groups and clans and that is very strong! We know this not only from politics, but our social media, even our buying things on Amazon, we are given things to look at that only we like and believe. It is a very dangerous problem our society faces and leads even to potential violence. In today’s world, the church is one of the few places left where a variety of people from all walks of life mingle together into one body. That’s valuable. And yet, even there, the need to isolate those who are outsiders have a natural human tendency. Of course, our friends and family attend here. Of course we are comfortable. So, how do we discern when that becomes welcome or unwelcome? How can people welcome the stranger, the outcast, and the foreigner when it is just too easy to stay with the status quo and the comfortable?

Slide: Mission Statement

Yet, try as we might, it is very difficult to read these Bible stories for today as anything **but** inclusive. Christ welcomes all who beckon him, especially the outsider and the outcast. All are welcome...period. Now, we can ignore that, but I know this church. We take our mission statement seriously: **St. John’s Lutheran Church is a people formed in the waters of Christian baptism to be a fountain of life for ALL who gather here, overflowing into a river of compassion for the world. All who gather. All.**

Slide: Isaiah Reading

Now listen again to this part of the reading in Isaiah:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath...I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Yes, God says. All are welcome. Everyone. All.

Slide: All are welcome here sign language

There are numerous reasons why people feel unwelcome in churches these days as even these places become more polarized. Maybe it's a childhood experience, or observation of bickering amongst the people of God. Maybe it's a corrupt or bullying leader. Maybe it's that people are unsure of how to integrate or are confused, or afraid they will seem ignorant. Maybe they are afraid of judgment from others or feel inadequate, some things that we can't always fix for people. After all, there is no such thing as a perfect church that has it all and is always inviting but there are churches that are warm and inviting. But, we can continue to strive to be as God calls us. I think that it is important that as the people of God, we continue to welcome all as best we can with the help of God. That we say it often and always. Maybe there are ways we can be more aware of our welcoming presence in this community and fellowship. I know we want to. And as I feel welcome here, I know the warmth and love from you must desire it, too.

So, I think this would be a good time to remind you right now that you are welcome here, foreigner, stranger, guest, member, active or inactive, child, woman, man, LGBTQIA, young or old and in between. You are welcome at worship, at the table, and at the font. You are welcome because Christ is here and we are knit to him together as all the saints are. All of us, even when we are not fully the best in our actions and words, are welcome because Christ welcomes us. Let us together remember this that if God loves us, than God loves all. And that is what makes the church a place for all people and that is also what makes the church a good place to be for all people. For, if God loves me and God loves you, than what a great God that is! Amen.