

Sermon for May 22, 2022—“Becoming the Beloved Community”

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C—Texts: Galatians 3:26-29; Matthew 25:33-39

In last week’s sermon about the Ethiopian eunuch—I used the word “marginalized,” referring to the eunuch, who was about as different as different could be back then. I asked how wide was wide, with respect to the way in which we welcome those who are different from us. I asked where might the Spirit lead us if we allow it to do so? If we have the courage to follow? If we have the humility to cast aside our crowns? If we lay aside our biases? Our preconceptions? Our prejudices?

So in light of those questions, I want to ask this morning—having heard from Paul and Matthew—whether any of us have ever felt marginalized? Like an outsider? You arrive somewhere, you didn’t know anyone and everybody else seemed to be greeting each other like long lost friends. Have you ever felt like the odd one out? Looking around in a crowded room, you experienced an overwhelmingly unpleasant experience of being different. You were the only man, woman, young person, older person, white person, black person, individual dressed in a certain way—whatever. You didn’t feel like you fitted. Uncomfortable isn’t it?

Then there are other times when we feel very much like an insider. We’re in a place and with people with whom we can easily feel at home. Everyone looks, thinks, acts like we do. We are comfortable. The overwhelming feeling is, “I belong.” The difference in finding ourselves in the two situations described above is something we feel deep within. But outwardly, not so much.

Often, people—either individually or as a group—don’t seem to notice how their presence and behavior affects those around them, how it either sparks discomfort or creates welcome; whether it is inclusive or exclusive. How open or closed a community is, is often quite subtle, but it is also quite powerful. It either draws others in or reinforces distance. This is also true of our congregation’s life.

I’ve spoken a lot, lately, about “relationships, partnerships and opportunities,” as a big part—actually, the key—to our future here at Westwood First. It more or less arose from the discernment team discussions—being less about reinventing the wheel, as it was about paying attention to and strengthening the relationships and partnerships of which we are already a part, looking to form new ones, and then taking advantage of the opportunities that arise, to do outreach—to become an increasingly bigger, more integral part of our community and our city, to the point where people would miss us if we weren’t around.

We want to draw people in—we want to attract more families, more children, add new members, etc.—of course we do. Every church does! But it doesn’t just happen. As I said a few weeks ago, there’s no program, no sermon, no rejuvenated youth ministry, no reinvented Sunday school that can save us. Likewise, we can’t just go out and help pick-up trash, and offer space in the church to City Gospel Mission, the Boy Scouts, the Westwood Woman’s Club—whoever—and expect to magically start growing. I wish! We all wish! The question, as I understand it, is less about what we can see around us—tangible things—than it is about things we cannot see. It’s about—as it usually is—what’s inside our hearts.

It's how we act when things that we do start to bear fruit—and people (as we hope they will) take an interest in our church. It's about how—as I said just a minute ago—our presence and behavior affects those around us, about how it either sparks discomfort or creates welcome. It's about how inclusive or exclusive we are, and it is about whether we will either draw others in or reinforces distance. Again, this is quite powerful.

The question, as I see it, is not **if**, but **how** we can become more inclusive, more open—about how we can move closer to becoming the “beloved community” envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr. The beloved community is a community in which everyone is cared for, nurtured; a community absent of poverty, hunger, and hate. This was Dr. King's dream and he imbued the term—first coined in the early 20th Century by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce—with new meaning, believing that, in fact, such a community was possible.

Dr. King wrote this, “. . .but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community. “It is this type of spirit and . . .love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.”

So, reflecting on all this—in considering the question about our ability to become a beloved community, the concepts of “welcoming” and “inviting” came to mind. While difficult to quantify and qualify, they are, nevertheless, keys to our future.

For me, welcome is a powerful word. Its power comes partly from the way that it is a word with emotional resonance. We all know what it feels like to be welcomed and equally we know the opposite, the feeling of rejection. Being genuinely welcomed anywhere is always going to be a positive affirming experience. When a friend or stranger crosses the threshold of someone's home after being invited, the word declares that the host is pleased to see them. Using the word also implies acceptance, friendship, even love.

In the context of a welcome to a church congregation, the word takes on a slightly different meaning. The person(s) doing the welcoming does not do so and the host, or even as the owner of the building. We welcome people on behalf of the One who is the host, the One who owns the building—God—doing so in the name of Jesus Christ. A church welcome is a way of saying that the individual entering is unconditionally invited to be part of the gathered worshipping community. The visitor has the status of an honored guest of the community. They are invited to feel that they belong for as long as they choose to stay.

Behind the idea of welcome in a church context there are further nuances of meaning. There is, we hope, pleasure at seeing the new person, combined with a genuine interest in their well-being. There is also the hope that they will return in the future with a promise that all that belongs to the congregation can also belong to them. In welcoming others, we're saying—in effect, through our actions as well as our words—that we have already discovered something in our experience at Westwood First, which visitors are invited to share.

This will rarely be apparent on the first visit. It takes time and effort, patience and openness, as we build relationships with visitors, even as we strengthen and form new relationships with other members of the congregation. At first things may seem strange to visitors—perhaps even alien. Perhaps they'll be guarded and cautious, especially if they've been hurt by the church previously.

Either way, the whole experience will be so much more pleasurable—and will increase the chances of them returning—if they were greeted with a warm smile and friendly welcome from the minute they enter the building. Without that sort of greeting, well, think about it: How would you feel? Would you want to come back? And what about those who'd been shunned elsewhere? Would we want to be the ones who put someone off church for good?

Probably not, but let's face it, we often act in ways that are decidedly unwelcoming without even realizing it, so being welcoming is something about which we must be deliberate, and it's more than just smiling, shaking a visitor's hand and greeting them warmly. So perhaps we might think about this in terms of hospitality

Most of us understand the notion of hospitality when it comes to inviting people over to our homes. We roll out the metaphorical red carpet by doing a deep clean, preparing snacks or a meal, and attending to the comfort of our guests. But more than that, we open ourselves and focus our complete attention on visitors, doing everything we can to make our home feel like theirs. That's what hospitality in our church should look like. I mean, if we pull out all the stops when welcoming people into our own homes, shouldn't we do the same when welcoming people into God's?

As we think about hospitality, it occurs to me that Jesus is the ultimate expression of hospitality. We believe that the God who created our universe showed up in human history in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. God entered our story, instead of simply demanding that we enter his. Perhaps that's the best definition of hospitality: Inviting others—no matter who they are, what they look like, how they dress, talk, etc., etc.—to become a part of their story more than we hope they'll be part of ours.

We extend hospitality when we welcome people within a community without an expectation that they will fully conform to it. We may even concede some of our community identity in order to be more hospitable to those who we welcome. This kind of hospitality sends a message beyond, "you are welcome to join us." It says, "We see you and want to join you, wherever you are." In short, hospitality doesn't just ask "do you want to be a part of our church?" It says, "how can our church be a part of your life?"

Psalm Thirty-four invites us to "...taste and see that the Lord is good..." You've heard me say that a lot, in the context of communion, as part of welcoming everyone to the Lord's Table. I mention it now because part of welcoming someone into our church is inviting them to come on a journey of "tasting and seeing," discovering what our congregation is all about. Perhaps they too will want to take part in what's happening here for both themselves and their family.

But welcoming people—any people—is only part of it. In fact, it will be pretty difficult to welcome people—if we don't invite them. All of us know in how daunting a task it is to persuade new people to come with us on Sunday, let alone to want to become part of our congregations, but again, it's something about which we must be deliberate-purposeful.

I was recently reading about a church that decided to quit being a welcoming church. In an article written by Rob Moss, a Lutheran pastor in Colorado. He wrote, “Like so many congregations, we've sunk an amazing amount of time and energy into becoming a welcoming church. We changed worship styles, trained greeters and ushers, wore name tags, brewed coffee, went to workshops on hospitality and put our friendliest people in the most prominent places on Sunday mornings.”

Pastor Moss realized that his congregation had been misplacing their emphasis. He was clear to say that welcoming is not wrong, and should in fact be done, but that simply being welcoming—at least from a missional perspective—is passive. It denotes waiting for visitors and guests to drop by, and that alone does not cut it.

It's because, you see, inviting is different. Inviting is active. Being an inviting church means that we leave the comfort of Sunday morning worship and seek out our neighbors. Being an inviting church starts with who God—in the person of Jesus Christ—has called us to be as church and mandates our joining God already at work in the world.

Each congregation has a purpose within God's mission. Each has particular gifts. No congregation is everything to everyone—that's impossible. But every congregation is—or can be—something to someone. Who can know God through our music or our worship liturgy? Who can experience forgiveness and grace through our church family? Who might come to deepen their faith through our Monday School gatherings, or being a part of our choirs—or our circles? Who needs the unique gifts we have to offer? Who can offer gifts we may need? Being an inviting and welcoming congregation involves sharing the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, embodied uniquely in every person—because it takes all of us using those gifts in service in service to those outside the walls of our building, out in the community.

Still—I get it. Being invitational and welcoming seems too big, too audacious, too frightening, so we simply don't do it. We question ourselves: How do I bring it up in conversation? What if I come across as judgmental? What if I get rejected? What if they don't feel comfortable? We tend to ask a lot of “what if” questions that focus on the negative side. But what if we looked at the **good** that might happen?

What if God has been preparing their heart, and has been waiting for someone to invite them? What if they're hurting and find healing at our church? What if it changes their life for the better? What if they experience authentic community and love for the first time? What if our church renews their once dead faith in Christ? What if they find hope they never dreamed of hoping for?

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing—actually here are two things:

First, being welcoming and inviting is not just a good idea. I mean, it's actually a great idea, but it's not about growing our church, and it's certainly not about survival. It simply can't be. I've often asked myself: If it's simply about numbers or survival, what does that say about us?

If what we do isn't solely about glorifying God, about willing and working for his good pleasure, about making disciples, and about doing our part in helping make the Kingdom of God a reality, do we even deserve to live? Do we even deserve to survive? I mean, churches close every day, about 4,000 per year according to studies. It happens, and it's not the worst thing that can happen to a church. What do I mean?

Well, as I've said repeatedly, and here's the second thing: It's about faithfulness. It's about loving God, and neighbor in equal measure. It's about loving one another as Christ himself commanded us, no matter who they might be. It's about loving everyone. It's about loving them in spite of the way they walk, talk, or dress. It's about loving them regardless of skin color, gender or sexual orientation, political affiliation—whatever. It's about loving them the way that God loves them.

Brothers and sisters, God wants to use us. It's often through a simple invitation, and a warm, sincere welcome, showing genuine interest in the person or people that find us. It's about establishing new relationships, while strengthening old ones. It's about forming partnerships that serve the community, and taking advantage of the opportunities to serve, especially those whom Christ called "the least of these." You know who I mean—and as I said last week, the good news, is that we don't have to go very far to find them, they live right here in Westwood.

If we do our part, I believe with every fiber of my being, that God will do his part. God will provide opportunities for us, and God will give the growth. We just have to plant the seed.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.