

Back in December, when I first announced this sermon series and asked for your questions, I received a lot of questions that day. The one we are talking about today was one of the first questions I saw. I was flipping through the stack of cards and when I saw it, I said to myself, “Nope. Not going there.” But that question kept calling to me. After all, someone in this church asked the question, so I thought we should address it.

As with all the questions, I have to reflect on what is actually being asked. Despite what many people believe, pastors are not mind readers. So, I broke down the question in several parts. First, I asked myself, “Is the person wanting to know if ‘All’ people are welcome?” What does “all” mean? Does it mean people of all races and ethnicities? People of all ages? People of all genders and orientations? People of all classes and education levels? People of all abilities? Is the person asking does all really mean all? It’s a valid question. Look around you. We pretty much all look the same.

Then, I thought, perhaps the person is asking, “Are all ‘welcome’ in this church?” The word *welcome* means something different to different people. Is welcome just a friendly greeting or is it something more? When we welcome a dinner guest into our home, it usually means more than just a friendly hello. We invite our guests in and break bread with them. We include them in our circle around the dinner table. We want to make them feel welcome, so we engage with them in conversation and enter into relationship with them.

We may not agree with everything our guests say or believe, but we still treat

them with respect and love. If we just sat there and ignored our dinner guests, they would not feel welcome. They would probably feel awkward and would want to leave. If we told them their beliefs and opinions were downright wrong, they would most definitely leave.

I’ve been to many dinner parties, and the ones where I feel most welcome, are the ones where there are no barriers or formalities. If I am only invited to sit in the formal dining room and many of the rooms are off limits, I don’t really feel welcome. I feel like I’m going through the motions, and I was only invited over as a formality. I don’t force myself in to the rooms with closed doors, but if someone invites me into the kitchen and I am allowed to see the stack of dirty dishes or better yet, allowed to help clean up, then I really feel welcome. I feel most welcome when I am invited in to be a part of their messy world, and in return, I am inclined to invite them to be a part of mine.

I continued contemplating this question because I still wasn’t sure what the person is really asking. “All Are Welcome” is currently a very popular slogan for many churches of all denominations. I thought perhaps the person was asking if all are really welcome at churches in general or is that just a marketing slogan? The “C” in church was capitalized on the card, so when the word “church” has an uppercase C, that usually means the universal church -- all churches, no matter the denomination. So, is the person asking are all people welcome in church period, in Christianity? Are all people welcome in the body of Christ?

Paul in the scripture today says yes. Paul is writing to a community of believers that includes Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are all people who are not Jewish. The Jews

had been taught that they were God's chosen people, but Paul teaches that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the gospel is now for all people – Jews and Gentiles alike. Everyone is God's chosen.

Paul isn't preaching against the scripture they had been taught all their lives. In fact, he points out that this teaching had been in scripture all along. He says in verse 4, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." He then goes on to show many examples of scripture to show that Jesus came for the Gentiles too. These examples were in scripture all along even if they weren't emphasized in their previous teaching.

Paul wants to make sure we understand how scripture was meant to be used. Portions of scripture were not to be taken out of context and used to show that God plays favorites. Scripture was not to be used as a weapon to shame, condemn or guilt people into repentance. Scripture was not to be used to manipulate people to further human's desire for power. Scripture was to be used for *our* instruction to learn how to live out *our* faith and to show *us* that God's mercy is for all people. And, therefore, we should welcome all people just as Christ has welcomed us.

Theologian Peter van Breemen says, "One of the deepest needs of the human heart is to be accepted and valued. Every human being wants to be loved, but there is an even deeper love, a love of acceptance. Every human being craves to be accepted, accepted for who they are, not for what they have done or achieved."<sup>1</sup> That's why God

has accepted and valued and loved us for who we are, and not for what we have done or achieved. God is a gracious host who invites all of us around his dinner table because he loves us, not because we've earned an invitation.

Van Breemen continues: "Nothing is so crippling as the experience of not being fully accepted. When we are not accepted, a deep, unnamed emptiness pervades our being. Acceptance gives us a feeling of being worthwhile and that we can grow at our own pace. We are encouraged and supported, but not forced."<sup>2</sup> God never forces us to change, but encourages us and sends us support people to help us. God doesn't want any of us to feel this crippling emptiness, so God extends his radical love and invites all people to his dinner party. He wants to engage with everyone and enter into relationship with all of us. When God is the host, there are no rooms off limits at his house. God wants us to feel truly welcome and accepted.

Paul gives the reason why it is so important to welcome others. When we truly love and accept all people in our hearts, then we "live in harmony with one another" (v.5) and "that together we may with one voice glorify God" (v.5). When we truly welcome others, we come together and become one unified voice that praises God.

When we stop judging and back-biting, we can actually come together as one to fulfill God's vision for the world and especially for the church. God has already done the hard work for us by already welcoming all people. All we have to do is imitate God. And, when we imitate God, there are no more divisions that make people

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<sup>1</sup> Peter van Breemen, qtd in *Feasting on the Word*, Patrick J. Howell, Location 1368.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

feel unwelcome: “There is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, no longer rich or poor, black or white or Hispanic or Asian, no longer gay or straight, traditional or progressive, no longer republican or democrat, conservative or liberal, no longer a capitalist or socialist or libertarian.”<sup>3</sup> When God’s radical love and acceptance brings us together, these divisions dissolve.

We can come together and see people for who they are and not what label is pressed upon them. We are all invited to God’s dinner party despite what others think of us or if others think we shouldn’t be there. It may be hard to attend a dinner party when there are so many different opinions and beliefs shared around the table, but God’s radical love and acceptance makes it possible.

The last part of this question that I contemplated rests on a small word – this. I wondered if the person was asking, “Are all people welcome in “this” church?” I wondered if the person feels welcome here. There has to be a reason why the question was asked. And, to be honest, I’ve asked the same question. In light of the probable split of the United Methodist Church, I’ve wondered if all people are truly welcome in this church.

I suspect the majority of the people here *believe* the Traditional Plan is based on God’s teaching of righteousness and holy living. Progressives *believe* their plan does the same thing. The particulars are what people can’t agree on. But, one thing I know for sure, “God doesn’t care what we believe. God cares how we treat people.”<sup>4</sup> No matter what happens to the structure of

this church or who owns the buildings, we are called to extend God’s radical love to all people in this church and in this community. That means the guests become the host. We invite everyone to God’s dinner party, engage with them, invite them into our world, give them a place to belong around the table, and love and accept them for who they are.

The intention of this series was to ask *God* questions. If the person who asked this question, is asking God, if all are welcome in this church, this scripture answers the question quite clearly. This scripture is based on the theology of God’s radical love and acceptance, and as imitators of God, we are to extend God’s radical love and acceptance to others. Just as God has welcomed us, we welcome others.

Are all welcome in this church? Do all feel welcome in this church? I can’t answer those questions for you. You have to answer those for yourself. But the church leadership recently created a new vision for this church that is based on God’s radical love and acceptance. I hope it will help to create a welcoming church. Let us all read it together:

As committed followers of Jesus Christ, we believe in God’s inclusive grace, and love all people. We share God’s love by serving our community and welcoming diverse people to join in meaningful, relevant worship. We live out our faith by practicing compassionate actions and words based on a prayer-filled life. We seek to grow our faith in community as we open our hearts to God’s vision for the church and for our daily lives. Amen.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, location 1440.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Garnaas-Holmes, <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/>