

Who Are We? Sermon Series  
#4 – How Do We Welcome?  
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Who are we? “We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.” That’s who our denomination’s Identity Statement says we are, but what does that mean for us as individuals and as a congregation? That’s the question we’ve been trying to answer in this sermon series. So far, here’s what we’ve figured out: To be a part of a movement you have to be moving, and that movement should be toward something, like the goal of making God’s Kingdom real here on earth. We concluded that we can reach that goal by being hyphens for wholeness, which connects people together, rather than create slashes of division, which keep people apart. And last week, we named the table as the prime connecting point, where we make companions by breaking bread together and sharing our life-giving sustenance.

We conclude the series today by looking at the word “welcome.” A couple interesting things to note about this word in our Identity Statement. First, it’s the only significant word that is said twice, as it brackets and informs our understanding of the table. And it’s the only verb, the only thing we’re called to do in our statement: to welcome others as God has welcomed us. The other words say who we are, but this one says what we do. So the concept of “welcome” has an important bearing on how we live as a denomination and as Disciples. But how do we welcome?

Our scripture passage today gives us a good example. Three visitors show up at Abraham’s tent flap, so he and Sarah bend over backwards to provide them with a gracious welcome. Abraham isn’t just doing this to be nice; the extension of hospitality was woven into the moral fabric of his society. There were no Holiday Inns or fast-food restaurants; travelers had to rely on the kindness of those along their way, and people were expected to take care of each other, even strangers who showed up at your door. In Jesus’ time, the importance of hospitality was still in place. He lived this sort of all-inclusive welcome, and expected others to do the same. In Luke’s gospel, he chastises a prominent Pharisee for not showing Jesus the proper hospitality when he arrives for a meal. And the author of Hebrews draws on the Genesis story when he says, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

For us as Disciples, our understanding of welcome is tied explicitly to the table. One of the reasons our founding fathers left their churches and started a new movement was that they believed there shouldn’t be any human-made obstacles placed in front of the table. If you were a believer, you were welcome, regardless of any other criteria that could be used to keep you away. We welcome all – not some, not the righteous, not those who meet our standards. We welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.

What should that sort of radical hospitality look like in our lives and the life of Crestwood? In our daily lives, we’ve all had good and bad experiences with hospitality. A prime example is Chick-Fila. This example is not about theology, it’s about chicken. Not only is the food good, but the service is outstanding. If you say “Thank you” to one of their workers, they respond with, “It’s my pleasure.” Every Chick-fila employee in every Chick-fila across America is trained to respond this way. I once tested this by saying “Thank you” as much as I could to the person serving me. I did it so many times that I’m not sure it was truly that person’s pleasure to serve me, but she never stopped saying it. Of course, Chick-fila employees are not hospitable to

me because they want to be my friend or think I'm a super-cool guy; they want me to spend more money at Chick-fila. And it works! If only the church were as effective at creating repeat customers. But according to the IRS, church is not supposed to be in the business of making money. So what is our motivation for hospitality?

Is our motivation to get people to join our church? Notice, the Identity Statement doesn't say, "As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table so that we can hand them a pledge card and sign them up for a ministry team." Hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church members. It's not about meeting institutional goals. As the Identity Statement says, we welcome because we have first been welcomed. It doesn't say what's supposed to happen as a result of our welcome; that part is up to God. All we are called to do is let people know they are welcome.

This type of welcome goes deeper than just a mere acknowledging of the other person's presence. We guys have this thing we do when we see someone we know but don't want to go all huggy-kissy with a greeting. We have the head nod. We kinda tilt our heads upward and half smile, as if to say, "I see you there, but I'm only going to minimally acknowledge you so as not to break this cool-guy façade I have going on." Too many churches only give head nods to people, if they even give that much! But the fragmentation in our world has led to the need for churches to do so much more than just minimally acknowledge the presence of guests. We have to make room, as Abraham and Sarah made room, as in the innkeeper made room for Mary and Joseph.

What we may fail to realize when a guest walks through our doors is that they are looking for something we take for granted. For example, think of how automated our world has become. You can gas up your car, take money out of the bank, check out a book from the library, and buy your groceries without ever talking to a real person. You can cycle through your whole day and never receive a "Hello" from another human being. Before technology started taking over our lives, daily activities spurred conversations and connections because you had to actually interact with other people to complete transactions. Now, for some folks those kinds of face-to-face interactions, those moments of human touch and connection, may only happen at church. Sunday morning may be their most anticipated time of the week. What will they find when they come here?

To genuinely welcome someone into our midst is to offer them a place to find refuge and rest, but it can also be a place of healing. There are a lot of people out there who don't come to church because they've been told by the church they are not welcomed. I know several people who had a bad experience at church and have vowed never to go back. They were told that if they didn't dress a certain way or act a certain way or believe a certain way, then they weren't welcome. And one of those people may build up the courage to give God one more try and come to Crestwood on Sunday. Will they be welcomed here? It is no accident that the words "hospitality" and "hospital" come from the same Latin word, because they both lead to the same results, which is healing.

But we are only getting half the picture if we believe that we are the only ones with something to offer when we welcome others. When we join together at the table, making room for the guests among us, we not only offer them a blessing, but we open ourselves to be blessed by them. As you think of the wonderful people in this church, realize that at one time or another, every one of them was a first-time guest. Every one of them! How would this church be different if they didn't feel welcomed here and decided not to come back? The next person who visits us may be a messenger from God, sent here to have a tremendous impact on Crestwood, and we are

called to make sure they know they are welcome here. Yes, our church has something to offer guests, but I believe guests have something to offer us, as well.

We make room at the table for them because God has made room at the table for us. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said, "Hospitality is the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them a space where change can take place." Some of our guests may come only once. Some may visit while they are passing through. Some may decide Crestwood isn't the right fit for them. Doesn't matter. Our job is to create the space and trust the Spirit of God to do the rest. Our responsibility is simple: We welcome all because God has welcomed us.

The early church was a test of hospitality. Fifteen different nationalities heard Peter's first sermon on Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshipping with women. Slaves and masters shared space as equals. Today's world has similar divisions with similar questions. Can white people live in peace with Hispanics and Asians and African Americans? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can Christians carry on friendships with Muslims? Can people who are divided socially and culturally still be brothers and sisters in faith?

Henri Nouwen said that we are a world of strangers, separated by geographical distance and ideological chasms and fear-based suspicions. Just let that sink in. We are a world of strangers. And yet, the Bible says that strangers – those estranged from us – should be exactly who we are welcoming into our midst, because no matter the differences we perceive on the outside, they carry within them the image of God. By welcoming them, we may be entertaining angels in our midst. The moment we come up with a reason to deny someone a place at the table, we have misused the good news which has been entrusted to us.

Who are we? "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." We are on the move, seeking to make connections with others as we welcome them as companions and share a life-giving meal with them, honoring their intrinsic value as children of God. As a denomination, as a church, as individuals, can this be our identity? Can we be a movement for God's kingdom in this fragmented world? Can we throw open our arms in welcome, sharing our sustenance with others as we make space for them? This is who we are called to be. May God help us to live like we believe it.