

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter + May 7, 2017**

Last Sunday, at the spring congregational meeting, a Welcoming Statement for PRLC was received with great enthusiasm.

The statement reads as follows:

*As people made one in the waters of baptism, we believe our lives and faith are strengthened by diversity. We strive to be a community that welcomes people of every ability, age, citizenship status, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, language, life circumstance, marital status, political perspective, race, and sexual orientation. Whether you are a believer, doubter, or seeker, we openly welcome and value you. We celebrate God's unconditional love and respond joyfully to your presence here. All are welcome. You are welcome.*

It's a great statement, thanks in large measure to the Reconciling in Christ Team who prayed and discussed and thought about the best way to put into words the welcome we extend to all people. We want to use this word of welcome and use it wisely. Maybe folks who wonder about their place of welcome in a Christian community or have doubts about it will know that this is a place of welcome and acceptance.

What if you were to refine the words of this wonderful statement into just a few words? How would you say it?

I might say it this way: This is a safe place.

This community is a safe place to be. This is a safe place.

Do you have a safe place? A place to go where you may be free from stress or fear? A place to just be and to be yourself?

Maybe it's your home or a special place in your home or maybe your safe place is to be with a trusted friend or spouse or a group of friends who know you and love you.

Is Phinney one of these safe places for you?

More than once, I've heard someone say that they feel this community is safe because they are not judged. When you are not judged but accepted for who you are, that's safe, and dwelling in such a safe place is a place of freedom.

I bet you've heard someone who has never been to church or never been to church in a very long time say "Boy, if I ever walked into the church the rafters would fall!" Implicit in such a statement is the notion that building, much less the community couldn't bear the presence of a big sinner.

The surprising good news is that rafters don't fall. Anyone is welcomed with open arms.

The other night we had a discussion with parents of middle schoolers and high schoolers. We acknowledge how busy we all are these days, and sometimes especially our children in school and sports and other activities. These many activities are very rewarding *and* very taxing and demanding. Someone noted during our conversation that a big difference between being part of the church community and activities related to school or soccer or drama or whatever it may be is that in those venues you usually have to produce or achieve to remain part of the group. You need to study and practice. At church, you are welcome any time and, your participation isn't dependent upon what you achieve. You just come as you are, ready or not, and you are welcome as you are, not as someone thinks you should be.

Yeah, this is a safe place. A safe place.

And the statement rolled out last Sunday is like a beautiful welcome mat, but that isn't all there is to being a place of safety and reconciliation and freedom. It behooves us all to practice what we preach.

The warm and gentle welcome, the friendly handshake or embrace, the hospitality of welcoming new people into the WAY process, the involvement in our neighborhood, wider church and commitment to global missions. These we must always keep on the front burner and we must work hard to be welcoming.

Isn't that why this is such a safe place? Isn't it because we are so friendly and warm and approachable and nice and because we're just such darned good Christians? Don't break your arms patting yourselves on the back!

Is this why we are a welcoming place?

I don't think so.

Please understand that these are all important and wonderful attributes of the community but this isn't really, first and foremost, why we are a safe place. No.

This is a safe place, because we have a good shepherd.

And I'm not talking about Anne or myself! (Although Anne is a pretty great shepherd.)

This is a safe place because Jesus makes it so. This is a safe place because Jesus is Lord and Shepherd of the flock.

Several years ago, a friend of mine, a colleague in Idaho, served a parish where the motto was "Where everyone is someone and Jesus Christ is Lord."

At some point, people began to wonder about that motto because it almost seemed as though Christ was an afterthought. It sort of sounded like, "Here you are someone and, oh, by the way, Christ is Lord."

My friend not so subtly changed one word that made a big difference. The new motto read: "Where everyone is someone BECAUSE Jesus Christ is Lord."

This is a safe place because we've got a good shepherd.

And Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd calls us and gathers the flock, for we know his voice. The Shepherd feeds the flock and guides the flock out, going before us, just as surely as he gathers us in.

It's a safe place when you can be part of a community where you are known and loved; where the shepherd who is Lord knows you, and knows you better than you know yourself, and welcomes you always with open arms.

This is a safe place because we have a good shepherd.

Here's a little secret. This safe place isn't dependent upon you or me or how well we behave. Goodness knows we often fail to represent the full love and wonder of the Shepherd. Sometimes we stray or get lost or choose to go our own way and sometimes

we bump into one another, and not so gently. SO, it's interesting to me that we first ask "What shall we do?" when it comes to questions around mission and ministry and justice. I'm not sure going to ourselves is always the most stable place to go.

I think the first question might better be "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

The Shepherd seeks out the lost, gathers the flock, and leads us even through valleys of the shadow of death. Jesus, the Shepherd, deserves the first word. Such is the journey of discernment – to seek first the living voice of the Shepherd.

Jesus makes this a safe place, and when it comes to safety and bringing people to safety, God has a pretty good track record.

When we gave thanks over the waters at the outset of the service we praised God for carrying the ark to safety in the flood and leading God's people from slavery to freedom, and guiding God's people through the wilderness, and in the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection carried us to safety and freedom. When we give thanks at the table we will praise God for these very same things.

All praise and gratitude goes to this Shepherd who makes this a safe place.

And .... there's more. Jesus takes it a step further.

More than opening the gate to safe pastures, Jesus says, "I am the Gate." I am the Gate for the Sheep.

We do not pass by him or around him or simply with his help or inspiration. We pass through Jesus.

We may be suspicious of gatekeepers or people who patrol borders. We may carry with us an image of a gates keeping people out, but Jesus as the gate doesn't imply that we must somehow jump through a hoop or pay a ticket, show an ID, or be afraid.

Jesus, the gate, is entrance into safe pastures. Pastures that are safe and life-giving.

Some ancient baptisteries or baptismal pools have the image of the Good Shepherd inscribed above the place where new Christians were immersed. They lovingly welcome each one into the fold and the flock. This is a new gate filled with the redeeming love of God. And through this gate we enter into a community, yes, where you are not judged or evaluated or scored, but where your gifts are welcomed and you are invited to feast at the Table of God's mercy.

Jesus is the gate. For whoever enters this gate will be saved. Say it this way: Whoever enters through Jesus, the gate, will be safe. Amen.