

All are welcome.

It's something we love to say. It's one of our favorite hymns! It's on a beautiful new banner, celebrating our new Reconciling in Christ status, in the narthex. All are welcome. You are people who, I believe, really mean that when you say it. We want *everyone* to know that they can come to Phinney Ridge and hear a message of love and inclusion – that they are welcome. It's not something that can be said in all denominations or all churches, so we should certainly keep saying it, loudly.

And at the same time, I want to challenge us a little bit today.

A few years ago, a member of the national ELCA churchwide staff did an experiment. She went to dozens of church services across the country. She sat in the back. She participated fully in worship. She reported that in 90% of those churches, not a single person welcomed her personally. Could one of those congregations have been Phinney Ridge? Maybe. We'll never know.

Of course, we like to think we are welcoming, because we have open doors, and we genuinely want anyone and everyone to feel they can come in. But is that what welcome *is*? Is it enough for a person to know they are welcome to join in what *we* are doing? They're welcome to blend in with us. Is that real welcome? Or is Jesus calling us to something bigger than that?

Today we are hearing the very end of the same sermon we've been listening to for the past three weeks. This is the last part of the sending of the apostles. Remember, Jesus already warned them how hard their work would be. He told them to go out with nothing – no food or sandals, no extra bags – and to rely entirely on strangers to keep them alive. To feed and house them. So the kind of welcome Jesus is talking about is not simply about politeness. It's about giving and receiving. It's about being vulnerable. It's about relationships in which people are mutually trusting, and are providing for one another's needs. Where they literally depend on one another for survival. Those who welcome, in this type of relationship, have to be willing to sacrifice for the needs of the stranger.

I know a family that loves to have people over for dinner. But when you come to dinner you aren't just given a beverage and told to relax. You are invited to join in the cooking. If you have a favorite family dish, you're even invited to bring your own ingredients! Your talents are used in the kitchen and your new flavors are served alongside the traditional favorites. People in the kitchen are laughing and talking and tripping over one another. They're learning from one another. In that home, it would be hard for a fly on the wall to tell who is the guest and who is the host.

What could our church, our world, look like if we understood *welcome* more like that?

I think we really have to do more than we even know. Because for as nice as we are, a lot of people still see Christianity as being inhospitable – even exclusive. We can say “all are welcome” until we are blue in the face, but if people feel they can’t be themselves here; that they have to conform or be on their best behavior; then our words are really empty.

Put yourself in the shoes of someone coming to church for the very first time. We do some strange stuff! We stand and sit at seemingly inexplicable moments. We use symbols and signs and insider language. Our pastors say and do and wear unusual things that everyone seems to understand. For all we do to be welcoming here – we need to keep doing more. So that our tradition and familiarity and history, which is such a gift to *us*, doesn’t become a barrier for others.

We recently became an official Reconciling in Christ congregation, and as a part of that process, we wrote and adopted a welcoming statement. I am going to read it to you now:

“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.”

I invite us all to take up the practice of praying this statement this year. You can find it in our newsletters or on our website. Read it often; read it slowly. What parts of this statement are you drawn to? What challenges you? Ask God to open your eyes to the ways in which we might be more welcoming.

Personally I’m drawn to the words, “joyfully respond.” What does it really mean to respond joyfully to someone’s presence? I think it means we need to not only invite people to join in with what we’re doing, but that we need to ask what gifts *they* have to offer. We need to ask what they have to teach us. Perhaps instead of always considering ourselves the gracious hosts and hostesses, perhaps welcome means being open to what someone else has to offer.

I saw an example of that kind of welcome this week during Vacation Bible School. On Wednesday we loaded up 45-or-so kids, and drove to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Ballard, where we spent the entire morning at their feeding program, Edible Hope. Edible Hope feeds up to 200 people breakfast five days a week. Many of you already have ties to that ministry already because of volunteering or giving financially.

As I watched our children at work at St. Luke this week, I saw a new way to volunteer. See, often our efforts to help others end up being one-sided charity. And that's *not* the kind of relationship Jesus has in mind for any of us. The children went to St. Luke's and they were welcomed by the workers there, some of them formerly homeless themselves. They worked side-by-side to create beautiful decorations for the tables. They scrubbed cupboards and mopped floors. Even the youngest three-year-olds helped prepare the meal for the next day. They gave a huge gift to St. Luke's – and at the very same time – St. Luke's gave a huge gift to them. The children were valued just as they are. They were given a share of the ministry. That's the kind of two-way relationship that Jesus is calling us to live with those we meet. *That's* holy. Because it was life-giving for *everyone* involved. No person was above or below another.

We are called to give to one another freely and receive from one another humbly, because God has done this for us already.

God's perfect example of welcome is shown to us right here – at this communion table.

We come here as vulnerable, hungry guests to Jesus' table. And Jesus, our host, welcomes us just as we are. Each time we prepare for communion we proclaim that we "lift our hearts to the Lord." We lift up our hearts – what is more vulnerable than that? We lift up our hearts and we place them in God's hands. Our broken hearts. Our joyful hearts. Our grieving or lonely or longing hearts. We lift them up, and we stand before God, stretching out empty hands. And God answers back with Christ's own life.

When we hear those words, "The body of Christ broken for *you*," that's the best kind of welcome there is. Because Jesus comes right to *you* and says, "Yup. I know you. I know all you're thinking and all you've done and all your shortcomings, and I love you anyway. All are welcome. You are welcome. Now go and do likewise."

Amen.