

Advent Lutheran Church
All Are Welcome
September 1, 2024
Leviticus 19:33-34
Hebrews 13:1-3
Luke 14:7-15

Over the last decade, I've visited more than 75 congregations in the Dallas – Fort Worth metro area. You heard that right – I've worshipped alongside folks in 75 different houses of worship.¹

I've shown up on Sunday morning in professional capacity as guest preacher or a consultant. But, more often than not I showed up as someone searching for a church – someone looking to connect with and perhaps even join a congregation.

When Susan and I moved back to DFW in 2015 after nearly a decade in Florida we looked for a church near our home at the time in Corinth just outside of Denton. Then, a few years later, we moved to downtown Fort Worth and started looking for a church closer to our new home.

For those of you who have not visited a new church in quite a while, let me assure you that it can be an intimidating experience. Even if you thoroughly review a church's website you never know exactly what to expect much less how welcome outsiders really are.

Church #1. I arrived and didn't see many cars or any signage telling me where to go so I waited until more people arrived then awkwardly followed them in. I chose a pew toward the back and sat quietly until someone approached me and told me "you can't sit this far back – our pastor wants everyone up front." When I made my way forward I learned most of the remaining seats needed to be saved for specific people – in case they were still on their way.

¹ Greg Smith, "Visiting 75 Churches in the Dallas – Fort Worth Metro Area" on So What Faith, April 22, 2024. Available from <https://sowhatfaith.com/2024/04/22/visiting-75-churches-in-the-dallas-fort-worth-metro-area/>

Church #2. As I drove into the parking lot I saw people wearing vests who guided me to a choice parking spot and directed me to a nearby building entrance. Once inside more folks wearing vests welcomed me and directed me to the sanctuary. Just outside those doors I was handed a program. Only as I got in my vehicle to drive home did I realize that I had never spoken to anyone apart from those in uniform – people who had signed up to be friendly.

Church #3. As I entered the church, I was greeted warmly by a smiling person who handed me some literature and said, “Welcome! It’s such a blessing to have you here with us today.” In the time before the service began, several people of varying ages came by and introduced themselves to me. They all seemed genuinely thankful I was there and wanted to meet me. As worship was ending I felt a tap on my shoulder and received an invitation to join in a time of coffee fellowship or to take a raincheck and do so on my next visit.

These three very different experiences remind us that every congregation offers a unique welcome.

Earlier this week a group of Advent members gathered for a roundtable conversation about hospitality. In their sharing I learned some of the many reasons these current members chose to make their first visit here. I also learned that not all of them had wonderful experiences on that visit. All, however, experienced Christian hospitality. And, they chose to keep coming back and eventually join Advent because of the welcome they received and the relationships that welcome birthed.

Right now, more people are learning about what the ELCA is than any time in recent years. Whatever your political preferences may be, the naming of Tim Walz as the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate sparked interest in Lutheranism. And as people have learned more about him many have also been learning more about our denomination: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

This sudden interest in the ELCA reminds me that my own curiosity in what is now the denomination in which I am ordained was cultivated by controversy. While I knew that the United Church of Christ existed, I was motivated to learn more when television networks refused to air UCC commercials. NBC and CBS found the content too controversial.²

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a series of ads created about twenty years ago that started the television portion of what was known as the Still Speaking Campaign. The very first ad was called "Bouncer."

The commercial shows a diverse group of people making their way toward a church only to be stopped at a red velvet rope controlled by bouncers dressed in black. While many are allowed in, others are denied. Those who are bounced include a gay couple, multiple minorities, and a man in a wheelchair.

The screen fades to black and with up tempo music in the background viewers read these words:

Jesus didn't turn away people. Neither do we.

Finally the announcer says

The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you're welcome here.³

Siblings in Christ, the unthinkable really was happening in our country just twenty years ago and frankly continues to this day: some churches are only willing to welcome people who look like or believe like or live like they do.

If that reality bothers you, then you are in the right place this morning. We have work yet to do.

I have barely scratched the surface of explaining what welcome often is and what welcome should be. I need to clarify, however, that whatever welcome is it is not merely a way to be polite.

² Alan Cooperman. "Two Networks Bar Religious Commercial" in Washington Post, Dec. 2, 2004. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26458-2004Dec1.html>>

³ The 30 second TV commercial "Bouncer" can be viewed at <<http://youtu.be/hx1u1v7hAtY>>

Welcome must be our response to God's welcome in the stories of our sacred text and in our own lives.

Amy Oden, a professor of church history who has written at length about hospitality, invites us to consider three examples of God's Welcome in the Bible:

1. Strangers bring God's welcome. Think for example of three strangers who give Abraham and Sarah news that they will be parents within the year despite their advanced ages.⁴
2. God welcomes all & God's welcome is always available. Recall the recurring story of the Hebrew Bible – "God welcomes the wayward Israelites back into covenant again and again."⁵
3. God's welcome changes people. When Jesus shared the good news of God's welcome fishermen dropped their nets and followed him into a new way of living.⁶

And recognize that we experience God's welcome in our everyday lives when . . .

- others reach out to us &
- when we receive an unexpected second chance &
- through forgiveness.⁷

More personally, I am receiving God's welcome in my life through you. In my first two months as your Interim Pastor you have gone out of your way to make me feel welcome. Thank you.

You all have many more stories of welcome that need to be shared. I encourage you to share some of your own experiences later this morning and in conversation throughout the week.

⁴ Amy G. Oden. *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Pilgrim Press, 2008), p.35. This story appears in Genesis 18.

⁵ Ibid. p.35

⁶ Ibid., p.36

⁷ Ibid., p.37-46.

This sermon is the first in a five part series on the characteristics of fruitful congregations based on a book by that name written by a United Methodist Bishop. It has required us to take a long look at radical hospitality. And it makes me wonder what grade you would give Advent for our hospitality efforts.

As you are working on your answer know that there are signs that this is or is becoming a priority. Our most recently created staff position is called Connections Coordinator. Earlier this weekend Hachmeister hospitality was on display at their home as they graciously welcomed all who desired fellowship. And there are conversations happening about ways to widen our welcome beyond our campus as well as new ways to welcome people here and to invite them to journey with us. People are dreaming about a future Advent in preparation for the Day of Discovery.

To keep us grounded, I return to the book that inspired this sermon series for insight into radical hospitality. Bishop Schnase writes:

Churches characterized by radical hospitality are not just friendly and courteous, passively receiving guests warmly . . . They are genuinely curious and interested in forming relationships with people outside their faith community. Faith communities practicing Radical Hospitality offer a surprising and unexpected quality of depth and authenticity in their caring for the stranger.⁸

As we live into this calling, we might encounter angels or others might perceive us as angels.⁹ Jesus goes even further by suggesting that in welcoming others we welcome him.¹⁰

And our Gospel lesson emphasizes the radical part of radical hospitality when it comes to advice for both dinner guests and dinner hosts. In expanding our welcome we become a blessing and we experience a blessing.¹¹

⁸ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised* (Abingdon Press, 2018), p.31.

⁹ Hebrews 13:2

¹⁰ Matthew 25

¹¹ Luke 14:14, *The Message*.

It is my prayer that Advent will be known as a congregation that loves and lives like Jesus beginning with our radical hospitality. May we be and increasingly become be a congregation where all are welcome. And a community of faith where all means all.

Amen.