

# Jesus welcomes all people; so do we

Message for Sunday, January 12, 2014  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Philippians 2:3

**Children's Message:** Excited about getting back to school after the Christmas break? Good to see your friends again!

Something to think about: although most families that are moving do it in the summer, sometimes for various reasons people move at other times of year. Have you noticed any new faces at school?

Let's say that a new family moves in just down the road from where you live. There are some new kids. Let's see what it means if we try to live what this Bible passage teaches us.

**Philippians 2:3-4, New Living Translation:**  
Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. And look out for one another's interests, not just for your own.

The Bible says, "Think of others, not just yourself." Well, let's try that. Let's imagine that you're a new kid at school.

- How does that feel?
- What could someone do to make you feel welcome? How would that feel?

Your job now is to go and do that. Even if there aren't any new people in your class, I'm sure there are some who would really appreciate you reaching out to them. Remember the key idea here: "Think about others, not just yourself."

**Message:** "Jesus welcomes all people; so do we"

## 1) Why welcome others to church

I rarely meet people who say, "I don't go to church because I don't believe in God." The truth is many people are very interested in God and Jesus; they just don't feel welcome at church – they think they wouldn't fit in. This message today focuses on being a welcoming church.

Jesus welcomed people, all kinds of people, with no exceptions.

**Luke 15:1-2, New Century Version:**  
The tax collectors and sinners all came to listen to Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law

began to complain: "Look, this man welcomes sinners and even eats with them."

In my mind, I get a picture of some well-dressed respectable person looking down his nose at those people. His whole attitude is "I am a good and holy person. God loves me. But these people – they are disgusting. God must hate these people." So he calls them "sinners" – not realizing that he himself is also a sinner, just as much as they are.

Friends, we all are sinners, me included. We all need forgiveness, we all need Jesus. I believe Jesus is giving us an example of how we are to welcome all kinds of people, even people that might make you feel uncomfortable.

Here's an example of what I mean. During a ministry course I took a couple of years ago, we were in small groups talking about the highs and lows of our ministries. Another pastor told us this.

Our church talks a lot about wanting to reach out into the community and welcome new people. One time a transgendered individual started attending our worship services. He was obviously a man—tall, muscular, 5 o'clock shadow on his face, deep voice—yet he wore women's clothing. This was fine; no one made rude comments about him. When he used the women's washroom, that caused quite a stir. Then he started coming to the women's group meetings, and they just didn't know how to handle it. I happened to be at the church one Saturday when there was a women's retreat, and he showed up. They more or less said to me, "You're the pastor; you handle it." I was very uncomfortable, to say the least; I had no idea what to say to him.

So I took him aside and asked him to tell me about himself. We had a good visit, about half an hour. I never said anything about him not being welcome; but he must have picked up my discomfort, because after our talk he left the building and went out to his car to leave. As I watched him, I was amazed to see some of these same women run out to him at his car and say to him, "Please don't go. We want you to come and be part of our group. We don't understand you, but we don't need to understand you. We love you just the way you are."

This other pastor ended the story, “I am so thrilled to be part of a church that doesn’t just talk about loving people, but actually does it.” I get the feeling that this is also a church which does that, and it’s a good feeling. I just want to encourage us to keep it up.

The Bible tells how the church grew rapidly after Jesus returned to heaven and the people received the Holy Spirit. The Church was originally an all-Jewish group; but then Greeks and Romans, Arabs and Africans, all kinds of people were joining. You can imagine this made a lot of people uncomfortable.

The apostle Paul gave them this principle to live by:

**Philippians 2:3, Living Bible**

**Don’t be selfish; don’t live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.**

Let’s use that Bible verse to show us how to be a welcoming church.

## 2) How to welcome others to church

### a) Put yourself in the other person’s place

The key to welcoming people is to be more concerned with what the visitor thinks of us, rather than what we think of the visitor. Again, **“Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.”** In other words, sometimes you have to go out of your way to make others feel welcome. The emphasis is on them, not us.

Imagine that you are a first time visitor to this church. (Perhaps try going to a town to a strange church where nobody knows you, just so you know how it feels.) Would you know which door to come in? What if you needed to go to the bathroom, but were too embarrassed to ask anyone? Would there be anyone to welcome your children, and introduce them to the Sunday School teachers for their ages? Would people say more than just, “Hi, how are you?”

### b) Talk with people

Note: When I say “talk with people,” I don’t mean just the greeters at the door. That’s their job! I’m talking about all the rest of us. Believe it or not, even in a small church like ours, there are still people who are strangers. A few weeks ago in a conversation I happened to mention the name of someone else in the congregation who shared their interest. The person I was talking with interrupted me and said, “I’m embarrassed to say this, but I’ve been coming here for 20 years, and I don’t know who you’re talking about.” I pointed out the person in

the crowd, and she said, “Oh yes, I recognize him... but I guess I don’t really know him.”

If that’s what it’s like among *regulars*, what will it feel like for newcomers?

Some people don’t know what to say to visitors. They say, “My name is \_\_\_\_\_.” Then their minds go blank. Here’s a suggestion. Figure out what you like best about your church; what really makes it special in your heart. Once you’re talking to a visitor, say, “Would you like to know something I really like about this church?” Who’s going to answer “No” to a question like that? Then, with a big smile on your face and with obvious enthusiasm in your voice, give your answer. Just be careful not to go on and on. The effect on visitors is remarkable.

In fact, we need to do this for others besides visitors. Why not go over to that person who’s been here for years, but you still don’t know their name or where they live? Step outside your comfortable circle of friends. Sometimes you have to go out of your way to make people feel welcome.

Here’s an idea: some churches have what they call “The Three Minute Rule.” The idea is that, when the worship service is over, they don’t talk to their usual friends for three minutes. During that time, they look for someone they don’t know very well and go over and ask how that person is doing.

### c) Be prepared to welcome

**Hebrews 13:1-2, Today’s English Version:**

**Keep on loving one another as Christians. Remember to welcome strangers in your homes.**

Expect new people to come to church. We want it; we pray for it; so act like we believe it! Be prepared.

How? By being ready to treat someone special. Here’s what they did in one church. Every week a different person or family was assigned to be the “hospitality family.” This household prepared extra food for Sunday dinner. During the morning service they would look for someone new — someone who needed a welcome — to spontaneously invite to dinner. Imagine being a first-time visitor at that church, and going home with someone you’ve just met, who treated you like a royal guest!

There are lots of ways to make people feel special. Again, sometimes we have to go out of our way to make people feel welcome. Such as in this story. This

happened in a church in Portland, Oregon, where Becky Pippert worshipped. She wrote about it in her book *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World*.

Becky was doing Christian outreach work with students at the university in Portland, Oregon (much the same as what Cameron Lawson does at PECI in Picton). She got to know one fellow named Bill. Bill was brilliant, and was always pondering the why's and how's of life. His hair was always messy, and in the entire time she knew him, she never once saw him wear a pair of shoes. Rain, sleet or snow, Bill was always barefoot. While he was attending university, he started coming to a Christian students' group Becky was leading, and Bill eventually became a Christian.

Across the street from the university was a old, large, established (i.e. wealthy) church. They had worked to maintain beauty and dignity in its worship service. The people loved the great hymns of the faith that flowed from the pipe organ. People still believed that "Sunday dress" meant "Sunday best." Parents and children polished their shoes, and wore handsome suits and dresses to church. This was a strong tradition in that church.

A few years earlier the church had decided that they wanted to "reach out" to the students who went to the university. They weren't sure how, but they just wanted them to feel welcome.

Then one Sunday after his decision to follow Jesus, Bill decided to worship there. He was wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt and of course no shoes. The person who greeted him looked a bit uncomfortable, but didn't say anything.

Bill began walking down the aisle looking for a seat. He looked like he was ready for the beach, not for worship—at least that's what most people thought when they turned and saw him. The church was quite crowded that Sunday, and he got all the way to the front without finding any place to sit. Would he go and stand at the back? By now everyone was watching him, holding their breath to see what would happen.

Bill had his own solution. He sat cross legged in the aisle between the two front pews — perfectly natural among students, but unheard of in this church. The tension in the air became so thick you could slice it.

At the rear of the church, the gray-haired head usher named Oakley was watching the whole spectacle. From the time he was young, he had been taught to dress for church in the clothes he would wear to see Jesus. So he

had on a blue three-piece suit and an elegant silk tie. A gold watch chain gleamed from his vest.

Oakley — his name was appropriate. He was old and strong like the oak tree. In previous years he had chaired the church board, and his reputation was solid. People said, "Oakley's quiet, but he's wise." If anyone could handle this distraction gracefully, he could.

Head usher Oakley began walking down the aisle, leaning on his cane. His trek to the front seemed to take forever. Entire wedding processions had finished in less time. The church became utterly silent. All eyes were focussed on him. You could not hear anyone breathe.

Some others from the Christian student group were also present in the congregation that day, and along with everyone else they watched Oakley approaching Bill. They thought, "Is he going to scold Bill? You can't blame him for what he's about to do. He would never guess that Bill is a Christian. His world is too far removed from Bill's for him to understand."

When Oakley finally stood next to where Bill was sitting, he dropped his cane on the carpet, and with some difficulty lowered himself to the floor, sitting beside Bill. He reached out his hand and whispered, "Glad to have you with us today."

Mr. Oakley understood that sometimes you have to stretch yourself a bit to make sure a person feels welcome.

**Philippians 2:3, Living Bible**

**Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.**

**Prayer:**

All this talk of stepping outside our comfort zone, that makes some people here feel, well, uncomfortable. Help us, Lord, to see that our purpose in life is not to feel comfortable, but to live as followers of Jesus. That means forgiving those who hurt us, loving our enemies and yes, even talking to people we don't know very well!

We pray that you would not only help us to know this truth, but to do this. In Jesus' name, Amen.