

Jesus welcomes everyone; so do we

Message for Sunday, September 8, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Philippians 2:3-4; Acts 10:34-35

Children's Message:

My wife Jane was looking for a particular item in some stores in Belleville, but couldn't find it. She finally went to Walmart, and again didn't see it. She saw three Walmart staff people talking to each other, so she went to ask them if Walmart had any of this product.

One woman frowned at her for interrupting their conversation. "Did you look on the shelves?"

"Yes, but I don't see it."

"Then we don't have it." And she went back to talking with her friends.

Compare that with what happens when I go to Home Hardware here in Stirling. I'll ask one of the staff, "I'm looking for *such-and-such*." The person will say, "It's in aisle 7, on the left side." If they're not real busy, the person will even take me to the exact spot and show me.

Which store makes me feel like they're glad to see me? The second one, of course. The way the people treat me shows that they care about customers.

The way we treat people in church is like that. But there's a big difference. In the church, you are not the customer. You are the staff. Jesus is the owner, and all of us are the staff. It's our job—all of us—to care about the other people around 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. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.

Message: "Jesus welcomes everyone; so do we"

There was a woman who was rather old-fashioned. She always wore elegant clothing, and her manner of speech was always elegant. She would never use vulgar words or slang, and she had a delicate way of talking about unpleasant topics. She and her

husband were planning a week's vacation in Florida, so she wrote to the campground they picked out and asked for a reservation.

She wanted to make sure the campground was fully equipped, and especially wanted to be sure they didn't use outhouses. She had never in her life used such a primitive device. But she didn't know how to ask about the toilet facilities. Ladies of her stature don't use the word "toilet." After much deliberation, she finally came up with the old-fashion term, "bathroom commode."

But when she wrote that down, she thought the language was still too crude. So she started all over again, rewrote the entire letter and referred to the bathroom commode merely as the "B.C." "Does the campground have its own B.C.?" is what she actually wrote.

Well, the campground owner wasn't old-fashioned at all and when he got the letter, he just couldn't figure out what the woman was talking about. That "B.C." business really stumped him. After worrying about it for a while, he showed the letter to several campers, but they couldn't imagine what the lady meant either. So, the campground owner, finally coming to the conclusion that the lady must be asking about the location of the local Baptist Church, sat down and wrote the following reply:

Dear Madam,

I regret, very much the delay in answering your letter, but I now take the pleasure of informing you that a B.C. is located 9 miles north of the campground, and is capable of seating 250 people at one time. It is located in a beautiful pine grove and is opened only on Sundays and Wednesdays. I admit it is quite a distance away if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a great number of people take their lunches along and make a day of it. They usually arrive early and stay late. My daughter met her husband in the B.C.

The last time my wife and I went was six years ago, and it was so crowded we had to stand up the whole time we were there. It may interest you to know that right now there is a supper planed to raise money to buy more seats. They're going to hold it in the basement of the B.C.

I would like to say it pains me very much not to be able to go more regularly, but is surely not due to lack of desire on my part. As we grow older, it seems to be more of an effort, particularly in the cold weather.

If you decide to come down to our campground, perhaps I could go with you for the first time you go, sit with you and introduce you to all the older folks. We will be sure to have a seat up in the front where you can be seen by everyone.

Remember we are a friendly community.

Sincerely yours...

Well, that campground owner worked hard to make his guest feel welcome!

That's what I'm talking about today: making others feel welcome in church. We already do that quite well; I just want to reinforce that.

You see, Jane and I went to another church last Sunday. The only people who approached us to speak with us were the ones who were on duty that day as greeters. We were there ten minutes before the service began, and no one else said hello. No one came over to us after the service, either. You won't find that here at St. Paul's!

1) Jesus welcomed people

Jesus surprised his disciples and others on many occasions by welcoming the people they would have least expected.

One time they took a shortcut through the country of Samaria. The disciples went into a village to buy food while Jesus waited at a nearby well. A woman came to draw water and Jesus asked her for a drink.

John 4:9, The Message:

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

The disciples returned to find Jesus and the woman deep in conversation. Their reaction was similar:

John 4:27, Message:

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn't believe he was talking with that kind of

a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

The end result of that conversation was that the woman put her faith in Jesus. But even more, she went back and told her whole village about him. They made him stay two more days, and at the end,

John 4:42, The Message:

They said to the woman, "We're no longer taking this on your say-so. We've heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He's the Savior of the world!"

All because Jesus reached out to this woman. He opened the door and welcomed her.

Over and over again through the gospels, we see Jesus accepting all kinds of people that did not count for much: foreigners, children, women, people with diseases, tax collectors, prostitutes, and so on.

They all loved it. People felt good about themselves after they were around Jesus. They felt they belonged to the kingdom of God Jesus talked about. They were welcome.

2) The early church welcomed people... with some nudging

After Jesus left, and the Christian Church developed, at first it was just for Jewish believers. The turning point came when God sent Peter, the leader of the church, to talk with Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter's eyes were opened and he declared,

Acts 10:34-35, Contemporary English Version:

"Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from."

As the church grew and spread beyond Jerusalem, there weren't Greek Churches and Arab Churches and Jewish Churches. They were all included in one family. The church in Jerusalem was a multilingual congregation. The people had different musical tastes, and even different clothing. They had different holidays—but they celebrated the Lord's Day as one body.

Pot luck suppers would have been incredible! For the Jewish Christians, who had been told ever since

they were infants that eating pork was wicked, it took some getting used to.

It was difficult, but they did it just the same. Along the way they learned the truth of Paul's saying:

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. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.

This verse will be all important when we apply some principles about how to welcome people.

3) How to welcome

a) Put yourself in the other person's place

The key to welcoming people is to be more concerned with what the guest thinks of us, rather than what we think of the guest. 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 guest to this church. (Perhaps try going to 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?

Put yourself in the other person's place.

b) Talk with people

Believe it or not, even in a small congregation like ours, there are still people who are strangers. Last year in a conversation I happened to mention the name of someone else in the congregation. 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 guests. 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 guest, 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. The effect on guests is remarkable.

In fact, we need to do this for others besides guests. 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.

c) Listen to people

People are facing all kinds of problems in life, just the same as you. It's very common in our culture to say, "Hi, how are you?"—but then just walk on by. This is one of my hot buttons. You want to hear me go on a rant, ask what I think about this.

Don't say that in church unless you really mean it! You can change the language a bit, so the other person knows you're sincere: "How are things going for you these days?"

d) Lots more ideas... What makes *you* feel welcome?

Next Steps:

- Pray: Thank Jesus that he welcomes you into his family, the church, even though you're not worthy. *None* of us are.
- Pray: Ask Jesus to help you think more about others, than about yourself. Shyness is self-centered; love is other-centered.
- Three minute rule: after worship, *don't* talk with any of the usual people for three minutes. Go and speak to someone else, especially anyone who might be a guest.