

“A Welcoming Church”

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I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

(Romans 12: 1-18)

Raise your hand if you think you are a better than average driver...

Now, raise your hand if you think you are the best driver in your family...

It is possible that this is a frequent topic of discussion in your house. It is our house, but it has been definitively established – both statistically and anecdotally – that the best driver in our family is... me. Just ask my wife, and she will tell you. She will tell you that what I just said is categorically false and that **she** is unequivocally the better driver. She is wrong, but that is what she will say.

In all seriousness, it is a statistical certainty that half of us are below average at driving. There is a median level of driving ability, and half of us are at or below that median. That is just the way math works. But it is not how the human psyche works, because studies have shown that, when motorists are asked, “Are you a better than average driver?” at least 93% will raise their hands and say, “Yes.”¹

It is a phenomenon that some scientists call “The Lake Wobegone Effect.”² In his long-running radio show “A Prairie Home Companion,” host Garrison Keillor would regularly include a humorous report on the news out of the fictitious town of Lake Wobegon, where, to quote Keillor, “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” It’s funny because that cannot really be true – all the men

¹ www.regit.cars/car-news/why-everyone-thinks-they-are-amazing-drivers-...

² <https://www.npr.org/2009/11/25/120541921/why-youre-not-the-great-driver-you-think-you-are>



cannot be that good looking, and all the kids cannot be above average. It is also funny because it draws on a truth of human experience – that we tend to see ourselves as above-average, even if that is not the reality.

Churches are not immune to this psychology. For example, if we got a representative from every church in America in one room and asked them to raise their hands if their church is a “welcoming church,” the results would be the same as our driving test. 93% or more would be raising their hands. But we know that cannot be the reality...

- How many churches have you attended as a visitor and no one introduced themselves to you, or where someone got kind of annoyed with you because you inadvertently sat in “their pew”?³
- Are we wrong to assume that people will know how to take communion by intinction, or even what that is?
- Are we sufficiently aware of how our worship language might seem kind of old-fashioned... or how we might be making people uncomfortable with our assumptions about gender?
- Do we realize the messages that our unwritten rules of conduct are sending to people who don’t know those unwritten rules?

We can send all kinds of unwelcoming messages to visitors and newcomers without even realizing that is what we are doing. And then there are those churches that make no bones – or apologies – about the fact that certain types of people are categorically NOT welcome. All churches think they are welcoming, but many are just not.

Now, let me just say very clearly that I have found this congregation to be very welcoming. As a relative newcomer myself, I remember well how kind and generous you were to me and my family on our arrival. In that hypothetical big room, I think we could raise our hands with confidence and say, “Yes, we are a welcoming church.” But, then again, I am not an objective observer... and we all have blind spots... and no congregation can afford to ignore the warnings that Paul gives the church in his letter to the Romans:

do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think...

be sober in judgment...

because there are lots of different kinds of people in the world...

so don’t turn your back on anyone...

because everyone has different strengths and weaknesses...

everyone has gifts that God can use...

so lead with love...

extend hospitality to strangers...

do not claim to be wiser than you are...

and “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

That, Paul says, is what a truly welcoming church looks like... and that is a pretty high standard for any congregation to meet.

That was, however, the bar that Jesus set in his own life and teaching. Many of his actions and much of his teaching related to the giving and receiving of hospitality. He was a guest in many different homes and shared meals at all kinds of tables. Though he never claimed a house of his own, he still served as the primary host in the homes of others. As

³Angela Denker, “3 Ways ‘All Are Welcome’ Is Hurting The Church,” posted November 11, 2014, at <https://sojo.net/articles/3-ways-all-are-welcome-hurting-church>

the guest at one dinner party, he challenged the hospitality of the host by saying he should not have invited just his friends, family, and rich neighbors. Instead, the invitation list should include “*the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.*” “You will be blessed,” Jesus said, “because they cannot repay you” (Luke 14:12-14). On another occasion, Jesus told a parable about a king who prepared a great banquet and sent out invitations, but the original invitees didn’t really care about that party and did not show up. They “made light of it,” Jesus said, and chose to tend to their own farms and businesses. The king then gathered his servants and said to them, “Those we invited were not worthy... Go out into the highways and the byways and invite everyone you find to the banquet” (Matthew 22:3-10). In the life and teachings of Jesus, we are taught again and again that everyone deserves to be welcomed, everyone has a place, especially the most vulnerable among us.⁴

That is why I am thrilled that our congregation is investing not just money but time and effort with our new mission partner, Neighbors for Refugees. This Westchester-based charity works with State Department sanctioned agencies like HIAS and Catholic Charities to assist refugee families who have been approved for resettlement in the United States. In recent weeks, members of our congregation have been actively assisting a couple from Afghanistan who are expecting a baby any day now, helping them to find stable employment, safe housing, medical care, English language classes, and guided introduction to a completely new way of life in America. This is the real work of authentic welcome – work that is not always easy, not without its hurdles and challenges – but work that honors our call to *lead with love... to extend hospitality to strangers... and if it is possible, so far as it depends on us, to live peaceably with all.*

This work is, as the apostle Paul understood very well, counter-cultural in many ways. It goes against the grain of much that the world would teach us. Politicians want us to see refugees as dangerous “invaders”... to believe that they are coming to do us harm, or even to “replace us real Americans.” But scripture urges us to push back against this current of negative rhetoric. “*Do not be conformed to this world,*” Paul says, “*but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*”

So, maybe we do not live in a world where “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” But we do live in a world where every person has a strength and a gift that can be used for the glory of God... a world where there is beauty in every heart and every spirit... and a world where all of God’s children, whatever yardstick we may try to use to measure them, deserve to be welcomed to the table. May this be our guide as we continue to strive to be a welcoming church in the eyes of Christ. ***Amen.***

⁴ Christine D. Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality,”
<https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53383.pdf>