

## **Pentecost 18B – Lectionary 25 – 09/22/2024**

There seems to be a great deal of confusion or disagreements on who we welcome. We have people, including Christians who want to define who to welcome. It is one's interpretation, but is the interpretation based on love or fear.

The God that I read about and experience and see modeled through Jesus is about welcoming all out of love. I do not believe that we are called to be gate keepers to God's beloved community. Yet there seem to be some Christians who believe they are. There are documents that are written and set to be introduced with a new president that would delete the terms sexual orientation and gender identity ("SOGI"), diversity, equity, and inclusion ("DEI"), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, and a number of other things, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists. This is the wording from the document.

I don't believe that it speaks as to where we are at Faith. Most of these terms are exactly what we have written in our welcoming statement as in affirmation. We, at Faith Lutheran Church, welcome you as a child of God. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." (Galatians 3:26) We strive to be a place where everyone is welcomed and affirmed.

No matter your age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, marital status, faith background, political leanings, or mental or physical ability – you are welcome as you are. As children of God, we are all one in Christ Jesus and rely on the unconditional nature of God's love and grace to be our help and guide.

As an RIC congregation, how would we respond if this document was introduced for the United States to adopt? Our welcoming statement turns this around and says that we are called to welcome and recognize all people the way God created them. When we start deciding who is not welcome, I believe we put ourselves above others. Also, it is out of fear and not love.

In our Gospel today, Jesus and his disciples were travelling through Galilee. They did a great deal of ministry in this region. Jesus was teaching only his disciples and telling them about his pending death and resurrection. The disciples did not understand what he was talking about it and were afraid to ask him.

Instead, they were arguing about who was the greatest. Male bravado at work. Even though Jesus knew what they were talking about, he asked them any way. But they were embarrassed and did not want to tell him.

Thus, Jesus did more teaching. He told them that in order to be great, one must be the last and servant of all. Quite a contrast from the male bravado that had gone on with the disciples. To emphasize his point even more he took a little child and put it among them. Jesus picked the child up and said, “whoever welcomes one such child in his name, welcomes me and not only me, but the one who sent me.”

I am sure Jesus left the disciples dumbfounded again. Children held the lowest place in society. Thus, how could Jesus say this. They may have thought that God looked for the one who stood above the rest. One way to do this is to put someone down.

God was supposed to be looking for the one who kept all of the commandments. God was supposed to be looking for the one who modeled greatness. Jesus said no. God welcomes the child, the least one in society.

Children didn't have any rights. They were still learning the commandments and needed to be disciplined. Why would God be looking for the least in society?

I believe when we feel insecure, is when we have to raise ourselves up. This normally means putting someone down. Don't we say this about bullies? It's as if they have to prove something. They may think it is to others, but I wonder if it is more to themselves.

In our country today, how much of politics is about putting someone down. You don't want to vote for them as they are doing a terrible job. Look at me and I will prove that I can give you what you are looking for, no matter what political party. How many enjoy listening to political ads? Isn't this what all of them do, put the other candidate down.

How often do I want to say, please tell me what you might be able to do and how. It sometimes makes it difficult to figure out what the truth is. We may want to be asking questions such as, “Do their words match their behavior?” Even more in line with our Gospel lesson today, “Do their words and behavior lift up the ones who are considered the lowest in our society?”

This is the challenging question for our church and ourselves today, Do our words and behavior lift up the least in our society today?. We would say of course through the Parish House and the Micro Food Pantry. Yes that is true. Our welcoming statement says that we welcome all as this is what Jesus is teaching us to do.

There are some in our country including Christians who would like the refugees, the immigrants removed from our country. Thus, we have confusion and disagreements in our country about who to welcome. Some of the non-welcoming language that I hear brings me back to the Old Testament. Almost as if Jesus' message of welcome is not recognized.

In Jesus' time there were two main groups of people, the Jews and Gentiles. Jesus and then Paul were saying that all were welcome. This was not easy for

followers of Jesus to understand either. Jesus and Paul both knew that things would have to change.

This is when arguments and disagreements happened. When followers of Jesus had to change in order to welcome, they were not happy and tried to keep things the way they were. The message has not changed. In fact, we have been trying to affirm people as they recognize who God made them to be.

This may be affirming to some, but unfortunately it is making others feel uncomfortable. When we become uncomfortable is when we put the brakes on and put up walls. We want to go back to the way it was when we felt we understood more and were comfortable.

This is what has been going on in our world, our country and our faith communities since the beginning of time. Unfortunately, it is now more polarized than ever before. It is scary as defenses become high and healthy discussions are more difficult.

I believe that we need to listen closely to the messages that we hear and see from the leadership in our country and in our faith communities. Do we hear and see messages of welcome or unwelcome? Do we hear and see messages of building up or tearing down? God's love is shown through welcoming and building up.

Our challenge is to be aware of our uncomfortableness when we are challenged to welcome all. We will have to decide whether it comes from danger or maybe a lack of understanding. I believe Jesus would challenge us to understand others who God made different from us, which in reality is everyone.

Jesus has really defined who is welcome, all people especially those who are looked at as the least in our society. This includes the refugees, the immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community. Welcoming does not mean better than but equal to. God does not call us to be gatekeepers, but actually gate openers out of love and not fear. For Jesus has told us this is where he will be.

Let us pray, welcoming God, thank you for welcoming each one of us into your family. There are times that we become uncomfortable with other people. Give us your wisdom in discovering who they are as you created them. Help us to remember that you do not call us to be gatekeepers, but to be gate openers to those who are viewed as the least in our society. You have told us that this is where you will be.

In Jesus' name, Amen