

HOW TO WELCOME
[written in oral form]

Isaiah 56:1-8
MT theme month

September 8, 2019
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I hope you know by now that the Ministry Team's theme is Welcoming:..... opening the door. Did you catch the significance of the picture of the church's front door on the bulletin cover? You had to open it,.... get it?

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Most of civilized society values being welcoming. It is common to see a "Welcome" door mat at a front door.

For thousands of years, hospitality and welcoming are cherished practices in most cultures, including in our Judeo-Christian tradition. There are many passages about being welcoming, such as today's text and the Romans 15:7 verse we are using to underscore the theme.

For the glory of God, we welcome people. God desires that we embrace and receive strangers and outsiders.

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So,.....why emphasize something we already value?
Why is this our theme?

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One reason, is there is a growing pushback in our country to welcoming outsiders, especially refugees. We need to preach to the choir. It helps to be reminded that welcoming is a divine mandate. It is the right way to live / to be.

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Another reason is too often outsiders trip over a church's welcome mat. It seems, churches struggle to be truly welcoming.

Putting the words "Everyone welcome" in print and applauding the concept, are Not enough. I'm not sure we fully understand what it means to be welcoming.

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For example, in December 2016, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas voted to fully welcome LGBTQ persons, including in marriage, ordination and so forth.

The Baptist General Conference of Texas, of which the church was a member, promptly dismissed the congregation--kicked them out.

The Conference stated, "All Texas Baptist are loving, respectful and welcoming to all people, but we are not affirming to homosexuality."

[pg 220, Homebrewed Christianity; Bill Leonard]

The Conference did not get it. They do Not understand what welcoming means.

Throughout the ages, churches have struggled with being welcoming. This is truly a blemish on the church. It is very sad and unfortunate. It's shameful.

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In the pursuit of spreading the Word, the early church struggled to be inclusive, but eventually did do a decent job of it.

In 323, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, suddenly everyone was included.

But, the invitation was not always so gentle and nice. The once persecuted church, persecuted the pagans.

In time, there was one church in Western Europe, and welcoming was not an issue because everyone was baptized into the church at birth.

Well,welcoming was an issue for dissenters, so called Heretics.

They were more than welcome to recant or be burned at the stake.

So,.....welcoming was a bit of a problem, then.

However, by the 1500's, thanks to the Anabaptists, welcoming became rather complicated. The Twice Born people decided / they made a choice to be in their church, which presented the situation of determining the rules to get in. How one believed was important, and it was more awkward for outsiders to get in.

In the early 20th century, Pentecostalism became a movement. They were thrice born people. They had a physical birth, then a conscientious rebirth--choosing to be a Christian, with water baptism, and then the "baptism of the Spirit."

Interestingly, anyone who received the baptism of the Spirit was accepted in, anyone, regardless of gender, race or economic status.

All who were thrice born were warmly welcomed into the church.

Pentecostals were openly accepting of woman to be preachers and leaders, way before other church groups welcomed women as equals.

Unfortunately, the Pentecostals today are not so welcoming anymore,

[pg 138. Bill Leonard]

This historical background is Heady stuff, I know, but Head Spirituality is the flavour for today.

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I presented some background information to demonstrate that the church has not had a stellar record in being truly welcoming.

Excluding shameful examples of racism and prejudice, I think most churches do want to be welcoming, yet do not fully understand what that means.

To be sure, it definitely does Not mean that outsiders are welcome just as long as they become just like insiders.

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Also, there is more to welcoming than good intentions.

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We give out many signals that reveal who we are and the true depth of our openness / our welcome.

One example, how many pickup trucks are parked in our nice, new parking lot? And, what does that say about us?

Or,... how many Lamborghinis are there? ??

We give out messages about our personality.

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To be sure, welcoming takes intentional effort and forethought.

And, we need to be aware of subtle and often embedded messages.

For example:

Homes can be attractive places for rodents, or they can be unwelcoming.

Places are unwelcoming for rodents if there is not water available or places for them to hide. Removing food sources, including a bird feeder or pet food is unwelcoming. And,... some people who want to make the environment really dangerous, put out poison.

Likewise, churches can have systemic deterrents that make them unwelcoming. Some can even be toxic and dangerous to outsiders.

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We have a welcome to everyone statement, and more specifically, we have rainbow signs about God's inclusive love.

The statement and the rainbow flags simply state that we are NOT a dangerous place. That's all, and that is not enough to qualify as welcoming.

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I am defining welcoming as more than the effort to invite.

I think being perceived as welcoming means being safe, comfortable, respected and being at ease. There is little uncertainty and anxiety.

Intentional forethought and planning are necessary to provide those conditions for others / outsiders. This likely means good research, too.

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We generally do some of this for our houseguests. We will ask if there are allergies or other personal needs.

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One time, I was hosting a couple from Southern France. They didn't speak any English, and had never been to North America.

I tried my best to be a good host. Showed them around and explained things. Just before they were heading up to bed, I said, "Please feel at home and help yourself to anything in the refrigerator." They looked puzzled, and went up stairs.

I thought to myself, "I think I said that correctly."

The next day, they were smiling when they showed me a section in their travel book. It said, "Do Not be shocked and dismayed if your host invites you to get food or drinks from their refrigerator."

The couple expected to be treated as honoured guests, and not have to fend for themselves like inconsequential family members. Their travel booklet explained the cultural differences, and they were fine.

Sometimes, it's hard to know how to prepare, without lots of research.

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When we travelled to Belarus for my older daughter's wedding, she explained a lot of things to them and to us. She had lived there for nearly two years. She knew what it was like to jump into their very different culture. Her advice was most helpful for all of us.

This brings up a good point: both the host and guest need to be gracious. The burden **is** on the host, but it is not all one sided.

I was warned that, at the family gathering before the wedding, I would be expected to drink shots of vodka with the groom's father.  
I did not like vodka, so I said sure, as long as he eats Tabasco peppers with me. I did bring some, and we all enjoyed seeing him turn red, with tears pouring out of his eyes.  
Okay,.....maybe I was not so gracious, but I should have be a more gracious guest, as the French couple were.

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It was beneficial, for all, that differences and expectations were explained.
The same is true for a church. For example, bulletins and the worship experience should be clear and informative enough so that those not from our tradition can feel at ease.

Generous, gracious hospitality necessitates awareness, planning and the passion to receive outsiders. Claiming to be welcoming is not enough. We may prop open the outer door, yet leave the screen door closed. That is the screening door blocking the way.

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Nevertheless, there is a significant concept missing, and that absence makes being welcoming much more difficult.

Today's text presents what is missing.

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The text begins with establishing the proper conditions and behaviours. "Thus says the Lord: maintain justice and do what is right." Justice and Righteousness are God's way for being / living.

Verses 3 and 4 states that foreigners / outsiders who come to worship God, who seek God ...must feel accepted as equals.

That is the expected condition to be welcoming.

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Also noteworthy is why or how these outsiders come to the place to be included. Both verses 7 and 8 declare that God will bring them, that God will gather them.

I am not sure how, likely by a divine spiritual pull, but God will bring outsiders to God's house.

Did you catch that? Not the bringing part, the other part. The God's house part.

The Right / correct ownership is mentioned in verse 5: "my house", "within my walls". Again in verse 7, "my holy mountain", "my house" and "my altar." It is God's. God is the owner.

The problem, the difficulty in being truly welcoming comes down to ownership. That is what is missing, which is understanding ownership.

Our sense of ownership is the problem.

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Everything changes when we let go of ownership!

The problem / the difficulty in striving to be welcoming comes from our sense of ownership.

When we claim this church to be OUR church, then we can set the rules, the conditions,and thus..we are more powerful than outsiders.

Coming into a situation as the weaker party is Not desirable and appealing. No matter how gracious and attentive the host tries to be, a guest / an outsider will sense the power imbalance, which can be intimidating. A guest must respectfully submit to the owner.

Everything is different when no one claims ownership.

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*In June, my sister and I rented a cottage in the Muskokas. She arrived there first, and when we arrived she showed us around and what she had learned. She was acting as a host, but she did not own the cottage. We were in this together, as equals. That awareness is significant. We were all at ease. We engaged and lived as equals.*

That is what happens when we the church release ownership.

In God's house / God's place we are all visitors.... free to worship God together as equals, and free to explore how best to nurture and fellowship.

Consider how letting go of ownership changes everything, in the church and beyond.

When we accept that this is God / the Creator's world, not ours, then immigration is NOT a threat.

When we let go of ownership, then we can really, authentically work on reconciliation with the indigenous peoples.

We would be equals learning our way together, and healing could happen.

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Contemplate,....consider Waterloo North, the building and everything to be God's, not ours. We worship here, fellowship here, struggle and grow here,.....and of course take care of the facilities, but it's NOT ours to claim. Imagine that we are Not the owners. Imagine the difference it makes.

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AND, remember that God will bring / will gather people to God's place,.....Not to our place.

We --all those who seek to worship and connect with God, we are all in this together,.....no ifs or conditions.

This is God's place. This is God's world, and we are welcome to be here.