

This We Believe: Welcome
Luke 14.7-23
Pentecost +16
September 13, 2015
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Several years ago, my family was living in our Battery Park home in Richmond, Virginia, when we heard that the infamous Westboro Baptist Church was coming to town. They were preparing for their case before the U.S. Supreme Court regarding the limits to which they can stretch the first amendment with free speech that is hate speech. On that particular visit, they were spending time in mock trial at the University of Richmond's law school, and they had a break of a couple of days between the mock trial and their real testimony before the Supreme Court.

What do you do if you're a hate group with some down time between responsibilities in one city and the next? Find some groups to protest, of course. The Westboro folks picked a few non-profits and churches in Richmond to taunt, including the large church just three doors from our home.

For whatever reason, it was a Sunday morning that we were not hurriedly getting dressed for church. Maybe we were taking a quiet morning at home; I don't remember. But I knew the Westboro people were coming, and I kept watching for them. Then all of a sudden, a minivan parked directly in front of my house. I stepped onto my front porch as a small group of protestors jumped out of the van for their demonstration. In matching tshirts, they carried two huge signs in each hand for a dramatic, visual effect, and the tamest of their signs read, "GOD HATES YOU." They stood on my sidewalk to arrange themselves and then walked to the corner, only two houses away from mine, to begin singing their hymns about God's hate, God's judgment, and the world's many abominations.

I felt such tremendous rage. There was nothing I could do in that moment to counteract such hate spoken in the name of a God I knew to be love. And if there was any chance they were actually right about their God, then I knew they spoke of a God I could not believe in. We always keep a bowl of sidewalk chalk on our front porch for outdoor play, and I swiftly grabbed large pieces of chalk. I went to the cement in front of their van, the space of sidewalk that led to my front door, and I began to write in huge letters: GOD IS LOVE. GOD IS LOVE. GOD IS LOVE. Then the King James

memory verse from childhood flowed out of my rage, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."

Neighbors began to walk toward the corner to see the spectacle of crazy, hate-mongers singing about the Hate of God while hundreds of church-goers silently walked past them into their place of worship. Lest you think the congregation was chosen for their feminist lady pastor or rainbow flags planted in the lawn, Westboro chose the somewhat conservative, predominantly African-American church simply because it was too big and had multiple services. And there's a half-verse in the Old Testament that implies large worship gatherings are an abomination to God. Westboro is really big on abominations. Worshipers filed past, and neighbors gathered. All the while, I'm shaking on the sidewalk as I scribble the Love of God knowing, at the very least, they will have to walk over my words to their car.

Richard, Jim, and Lauren arrived. Humanist, agnostic, gay, and me with my hands full of chalk. My neighbors laughed affectionately as I now marked the columns of my front porch with the words GOD IS LOVE. They looked at the scene with amusement and a general sense that I was somehow an exception to the rule about Christians and naive to not understand that the words Westboro was spouting were really at the core of most Christian churches. They broadly dismissed us all because the voices of unwelcome are so loud and so prolific. As in Kentucky last week, sometimes the voices of unwelcome hold press conferences and blast "Eye of the Tiger" while waving white crosses and claiming religious persecution.

In our gospel text this morning, Jesus is talking to insiders and experts, faithful and devout, about all of the people they're excluding. This is not a sermon, he's been invited to the table. He is respected enough and curious enough to make the list. And at the very table where he is a guest, he accuses his hosts of being too similar to the culture around them that makes decisions by ego—will this personal contact benefit me? Will it position my family strategically? Is my table set for just the right folks? Am I getting invited to just the right dinners in exchange?

The culture sounds similar to our own, yet it's not entirely a world we understand because some of these social exchanges might have threatened a family financially if they chose poorly. And opening ones doors to the poor, the outcast, the beggar at the edge of town could surely ruin a person's efforts to be deemed important by a 1st century honor and shame culture.

Nevertheless, Jesus told them, you're thinking too small. Forget what your neighbors are doing. Consider, what is God doing? If God throws a dinner party, who's invited? What does *that* table look like? Start dreaming bigger than you've ever dreamed and then line your life up behind *that* kingdom vision.

Last week I invited you to imagine a circular loop of arrows flowing in two directions to and from this room. The love arrows are the ones we are sending out into the world. How are we going out into this world as neighbors? How do we carry the Way of Love into our ordinary lives? The welcome arrows are the ones coming into this space. How do we welcome people into this school of love? How do we welcome all people into our lives just as God welcomes us? The ways we love and the ways we welcome are intertwined as the stuff of God's kingdom.

In Jesus' parable, the banquet table is filled not by chance but by intention. The servant is commanded, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." When the invitation to feast is ignored, the feast just gets bigger and the invitations get louder. How many tables are there? How many can come in to dine? How generous is the one throwing the party? We already have something really lovely going on at the feast we know. And yet, Jesus implores us to think bigger about what God's ways are like.

One theme in this five-week series has been the intersections between the various parts of our identity statement. Asking great questions prompts certain justice seeking actions in the world. Justice seeking actions are made possible by a commitment to loving our neighbors and being loving neighbors. Welcoming all people is inspired by the questions we have asked, inspired by the love we show and have been shown, and strengthened by our collective call to seek justice.

Maybe it sounds elementary to say we welcome all people here and that people already know they are welcome. Perhaps we don't think we need to go out into the roads and lanes to share the invitation we offer. We at St. Charles often assume that the city out there knows who we are, knows that we're an open and thoughtful congregation, know that we have historically been at the forefront of making room for people that other congregations exclude. However, we cannot assume many people know the story of what we did in decades past. Neither can we assume people know who we are in these walls today.

We must reintroduce ourselves, tell our story, carry our welcome out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to join their lives with ours. We must be loving neighbors out there in such a way that people know exactly who we are. We're not inviting people to

join a committee or pay my salary. We're offering a holy welcome to all we meet because we believe the diversity of our gatherings reflects the world God wants for us. We believe that the kingdom of God has room for all and God's feast table has seats for everyone.

We have to tell our story because there are countless congregations who absolutely do not live out a true hospitality. All of the welcome signs outside our buildings should come with an asterisk explaining just who we're welcoming. You see, the Church at large is not known by its love but by that asterisk. We welcome all..well, all of the already put together, the already figured it out. We welcome all...of the straight, the married, the 2.5 children. We welcome all...of the master's degree, the PhD, the pedigree. We welcome all...those who memorize what the pastor teaches and don't challenge or contradict. We welcome all...those who can put money in our coffers and beauty in our pews. Many welcomes are not a welcome.

We know these asterisk welcomes have been true for women who do not remain silent and stay in the small space they've been given. The ones like me who are told the devil knows the scriptures, too, and will try to convince young girls to preach. This has been true for pastors, missionaries, and seminary professors who will not profess faith in an inerrant, infallible scripture. Friends we love who either signed a document against their conscience or lost their jobs and homes as they confessed their un-orthodoxy.

This most definitely continues to be true for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Ask Dennis who came out and was then told by his pastor that his baptism was invalidated. When he found a safe space and a welcoming church, he tenderly asked for a ritual of re-baptism. Ask William who faithfully sang in worship every time he went to his home church to visit until the pastor found out that his roommate was his partner, and he was told he could not lead in worship again. Communion refused, fellowship denied. These stories become deep wounds that too many dear ones carry. In time, friends within our own sacred space may one day tell you of the congregations that denied them community unless they remained quiet about their identity and remained single forever with an amply demonstrated portion of perpetual guilt and shame.

We must articulate that our welcome is for all. Several weeks ago in our mid-summer business meeting, I shared that the Supreme Court's decision to extend marriage to all couples was an opportunity for us at St. Charles to examine our welcome. We've been having this conversation off-and-on, privately and openly, for a full forty years. With the law extended to all people and a church wedding policy that honors all legal marriages, I shared that I am already in a position to say "yes" to any members of this congregation who wish to exchange holy vows in this sacred space.

Then I shared a survey that I borrowed from a pastor friend in Virginia, and it highlighted a continuum that represents positions held by every church in America on LGBT people of faith. Some of you were unhappy with just how broad the options were; on one end is denial of membership altogether, and on the other is full inclusion and full welcome. I shared the full range of options, in part, to be honest and leave room for those who may agree with a statement of unwelcome. Also, I suspected that we were huddled together on the welcoming end of that continuum and wanted a tool that helped highlight that fact. Unanimously, those present affirmed that we are and should be a welcoming congregation. In almost 40 surveys, 34 believe St. Charles should be a community of full inclusion with the remaining friends acknowledging they absolutely want to extend a holy welcome to all people, but the expansion of marriage is still mysterious and new. There is room here for conversation about the ways we agree and disagree. That is part of the way we love and welcome each other.

Welcoming all is a beautiful sentiment, and we give a lot of print space on the back of our bulletin to being people who welcome. (How many times have I used the world already this morning?!) Welcoming is also easier said than done because we are still called to love and to welcome even when we find ourselves on opposite sides of a line neither will cross—and when we're called to bless those on the other side of what can feel like a great, big chasm. What does it look like when our asterisk welcome reads, "We welcome all who also want to welcome all?"

Rachel Held Evans writes of a church called The Refuge; "an eclectic and growing faith community in Denver inspired by both the Beatitudes and the twelve steps of Alcoholic Anonymous." Founder and pastor Kathy Escobar wanted to create a community for "Christians who kept their battles with pain and depression a secret from their churches."

Like St. Charles, The Refuge doesn't have a creed or doctrinal statement they affirm as a collective body. Instead, they extend this invitation:

We love to throw parties, tell stories, find hope, and practice the ways of Jesus as best we can.

We're all hurt or hungry in our own ways.

We're at different places on our journey but we share a guiding story, a sweeping epic drama called the Bible.

We find faith as we follow Jesus and share a willingness to honestly wrestle with God and our questions and doubts.

We find dignity as God's image-bearers and strive to call out that dignity in one another.

We all receive, we all give.

We are old, young, poor, rich, conservative, liberal, single, married, gay, straight, evangelicals, progressives, overeducated, undereducated, certain, doubting, hurting, thriving.

Yet Christ's love binds our differences together in unity.

At The Refuge, everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable."¹

My friends, this morning may you hear Jesus' invitation to imagine a bigger and better story. May you consider, what is God doing around me and through me? May you wonder with delight who is invited to a dinner party God throws. May you imagine what God's banquet table looks like. Let's start dreaming bigger than we've ever dreamed and then line our lives up behind that kingdom vision.

May the peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Welcome to worship at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, where we aspire to serve God by asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all.

My friends, *this* we believe.

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching For Sunday*, pp. 72-73