

Aspire (Week 5) - Welcome
Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. We spent the morning yesterday talking about KirkWood's penultimate aspiration which reads as follows: "CORE VALUE #5 Welcome – All Y'all are Welcome. All Y'all Means All Y'all. As God has welcomed us, we show Christian hospitality and invite others into community and spiritual growth with us. We love each and every person as a child of God."



2. The language of that core value is drawn directly from scripture, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15.7). There are several words in the New Testament that get translated into English as "welcome." The term in Rom. 15.7 is the most intensive: it includes receiving someone, accepting someone, and bringing them close for the long haul.

3. But the most noteworthy feature of Romans 15.7 only becomes apparent if you know a little New Testament chronology. The letter we know as Romans was written in the latter half of the 50s CE; Jesus' public ministry occurred 25 years prior. Thus, the Christians in the church at Rome had almost certainly never been "welcomed by Christ" personally.

4. So how were these Roman Christians welcomed by Christ? Well, they were welcomed by Christians and in that welcome they came to sense the welcome of Jesus Himself. At some point, a few Christians arrived in the capital city of the empire (one of whom may have been the disciple Peter) and those Christians started to do what we know the first Christians did everywhere: they extended hospitality and welcome, letting any and all come to learn about Christ, be loved, and find community. As Dr. Andrew Arterbury, an expert on the welcome of the earliest church, puts it: "The first churches were an oasis of kindness in an unkind world."

5. Moreover, this Christian welcome was entirely countercultural in the most striking way. To see that, you need to know that Romans 15.7 occurs within a larger section of the Roman letter. If you go back one chapter, you'll find the very same word "welcome" used in Rom. [14.1 and 14.3](#), in which we are told that even those who have seemingly-impossible religious and social differences (Jews and Greco-Romans/Gentiles) should welcome each other without quarreling. Thus, Christian welcome knows no boundaries or border; there is no variety, sort, class, or category of person outside of Christian welcome.

6. It is only if Christians welcome in such an accepting, limitless way that non-Christians, like the Romans, will find it easier to come to know and cherish our God who welcomes. Being welcoming and hospitable is a hallmark of the Judeo-Christian God. South African writer Jenneth Graser describes the character trait of God this way: "The very nature of God is welcoming...As the prophet Jeremiah declared even in the very worst of times: "God's mercies are new every day." They welcome us each morning; they precede us every dawn. God's hospitality is for everyone – children, men and women, young and old, poor and rich, sick and healthy, everyone. God's hospitality is empowered by God's love. There are no mixed motives or underlying intentions. God invites us to abide, to remain, to make our home with Him. When we encounter the hospitality of God, we can never be the same again."

7. C. Randy Schrock, writing for Renovare, says that a commitment to Christian welcome in its fullness, as a follower of Jesus or as a church community, requires at least three commitments:

- a) Gentle persistence - Initially, the person may well be suspicious of our efforts to offer a relational connection. This is to be expected.
- b) Unconditional acceptance - True hospitality is welcoming the stranger on his or her own terms. This means we accept the person as they are, a human being as loved by God, not as we want them to be or as our "project." In offering hospitality, it is important for us to forgo any expectations as to when and what type of change will occur. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.
- c) Mutual suffering - Accepting people on their own terms includes receiving not just the individual but also their wounds. Offering hospitality to wounded people means that we enter into their suffering, and this kind of compassion is indeed painful.

8. So how are you doing at living welcome so that others can come home to our welcoming God? To be able to welcome strangers and offer hospitality requires margins, and margins are hard to find in a busy, frenetic world. Can you set aside energy and emotional bandwidth in order to welcome? Can you always preserve room for a new relationship in order to welcome well? Can your family prioritize welcome even if it means something else on your full schedule loses out for a time?

9. How are we doing at welcome as a church? Those who would know best would be those who are newer to KirkWood, and we'd welcome their feedback. Are we intentional to practice something like the 3-minute rule, where before and after the worship service we seek to engage with those we don't know for the first 3 minutes? What about the empty chair rule, which says that all groups, classes, and ministry teams should always seek to add someone new? Are ways to connect to groups, classes, and ministries clear and easy? Last, is there any - ANY - sort, kind, variety, or category of person who wouldn't be received and accepted graciously at KW? (The answer should be no.)

10. Let's summarize two ways. First, from Hood Memorial Christian Church of Dunn, NC (which is part of a partner denomination of the PCUSA) describes their commitment to welcome this way: "God welcomes everyone...and so do we. Welcome is a core message of the Bible. Welcome is a central practice of both Christians and Jews alike. Welcoming other people is a divine mandate. No one is excluded from welcome." Second, the PCUSA's own book of order (G-1.0302) describes a failure to welcome in the starkest of terms: "Failure to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons constitutes a rejection of Christ Himself and causes a scandal to the gospel."

Welcome this Week

- Most importantly, go through your week with the purpose to be welcoming and hospitable to everyone you encounter. Talk to your family about a step you can take together toward greater Christian welcome.
- Want to read through that larger section in Romans about countercultural welcome and community?: [Romans 13.8-15.13 NRSVUE](#)
- More on Christian welcome: [Renovaré | Welcoming the Stranger - Jan Johnson](#) and [RADICAL WELCOME | 8 Habits](#)
- How are we doing at being a welcoming church? How would The Lewis Center for Church Leadership answer that about us? What ideas can we glean from them?: [50 Ways to Welcome New People - Lewis Center for Church Leadership](#)
- Pray for your commitment to welcome, as well as KW's - you can use this prayer that closed our service yesterday...

Adapted from Rev. Naomi King (The Wonderment):

Our hospitable and welcoming God, teach us to open our shuttered hearts and overcrowded lives so that we who have been claimed by Your love will share it more readily with others. It is so easy to live absent in the world, cloistered away in our own needs and pursuits. So help us make wide circles of welcome, big enough for friends and strangers alike. May these circles be held together by the attitudes and actions we see on display in Jesus of Nazareth: forbearance, forgiveness, gratitude, joy, grace, and great, unquenchable love. When we encounter someone wandering alone through life, may we take the initiative to invite them into our circles of welcome, because in Christ's Kingdom no one is lost, no one is abandoned, and all are sought in earnest, amen.