

On a Mission from God Sermon Series  
Welcome and Accepts All People  
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Simon Sinek, an author and motivational speaker, wrote a great book in 2009 called “Start with Why.” Sinek’s premise was that a lot of companies and organizations know *what* they do and they *know* how they do it, but they aren’t clear on why they do it. He used several visionary organizations, like Apple, to show that successful companies understand the “why” of their purpose, which then informs the what and the how. Sinek says every organization should have a “why” that’s unique to it.

So, what is Crestwood’s “why”? Why do we do what we do? That’s tough to answer, because we don’t make cellphones or sell widgets, so there’s not a bottom line to measure. We could say our “why” is to spread the gospel or to bring people to Jesus, but that’s the “why” of every church in Lexington. What makes Crestwood Crestwood? Who is God calling us to be at 1882 Bellefonte Dr.? What’s our “why”?

We tackled that question in 2014 and came up with our vision and mission statements, which are printed on the front of your bulletin. Our vision is to connect people to God and each other, and our mission spells out five ways we seek to do that. We’ve been living with those statements for almost six years now. It’s time to ask how we’re doing. Are we achieving our “why”? Are we being the church God called us to be?

For Lent this year, we’re going to be taking a closer look at our mission statement to see how well we’ve done in fulfilling it these last five years. Trish and I are going to preach on each of the five bullet points, and then we’re going to ask you to give us feedback on how well you think we’ve done in fulfilling that bullet point. There will be surveys waiting in your inbox when you get home today, and there are paper copies available at the sound board in the back if you’d rather fill one of those out. Your feedback is essential to this process, so please add your voice to the conversation and tell us how we’re doing. We want to hear from you!

Let’s start with the first bullet point. “Welcomes and accepts all people.” Do we? When we first presented this statement in 2014, one congregation member said, “This is hard. We don’t do this.” Do we? I think that’s an interesting place to start the conversation. Many of the visitors to Crestwood say that they experience this to be a very warm and welcoming congregation. I believe one of the reasons we have so many new families in our church is because they felt genuinely welcomed here. When I open the greeting time and encourage you to introduce yourself to someone you don’t know, I trust that you try and do that. We go out of our way to extend hospitality to those in our midst.

But before we break our arms patting ourselves on the back, let’s remember that our Mission Statement is not meant to name who we are, but who God is calling us to be. That means that, while we do each of these things well, there is room for challenge and growth. For example, the Mission Statement says we welcome and accept all people, but I believe that each and every one of us has a limit to “all.” I know I do. I would struggle to welcome someone who had been convicted of a violent crime. I would have a hard time welcoming someone who had wronged me or my family. Who would you have trouble welcoming? Each one of us has a limit to “all.”

Here’s something a tad shocking: there’s actually biblical precedent for not welcoming all people into your midst. In the Hebrew scriptures, as the Israelites are settling into their new

home in the Promised Land, God is very explicit about instructing them not to intermingle with the pagan tribes that surrounded them. God didn't want the Israelite's purity diluted by the introduction of foreign gods or foreign wives, so through the law God told them to keep to themselves and exclude those not like them. During the greeting time, God said, "Don't you dare introduce yourself to someone you don't know!"

Thankfully, Jesus came along, who told us that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Rather than trying to keep his followers separate from those around him, Jesus repeatedly crossed boundaries and upset the exclusivist tendencies of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, had conversations with women and lepers, and often made the hated Samaritan foreigners the heroes of his parables. Jesus radically redefined what it meant to connect with God and each other, especially those not like us.

So if Jesus left us with an example of welcoming all to the table, where did we go wrong? Unfortunately, the church in America today has a reputation for being mean-spirited, exclusivist, and extremely prejudiced – all in the name of Jesus. I believe that started way back at the Reformation, when Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church and began interpreting the Bible for themselves. They quickly learned that where two or three are gathered, there will be four opinions, and none of them will agree. So the Protestant church started splitting over issues of doctrine and biblical interpretation.

That's the issue about trying to interpret and apply what we think the Bible says. Every single person who does this believes in their heart that they have it right. And not everyone has the humility to keep that opinion to themselves, so out of their passion and conviction, Christians began trying to encourage people who disagreed with them to see how wrong they were. And if someone didn't come around to the correct way of seeing things, then those folks weren't welcomed in the church or at the communion table. That's why today we have thousands of different denominations, many of which are downright hostile to those who think or act differently than them.

I'm relieved to say that I don't believe Crestwood or the Disciples of Christ denomination is one of them. We have a generous spirit when it comes to welcoming people different than us, and I believe our church is especially good at creating space for people who hold differing views. But I'd like to suggest there is a difference between welcoming someone and accepting them. It's one thing to have them worship with us for a week or two. But what if that person we don't want here joins the church? Or serves on our ministry team? What if they sit next to us in worship?

The root question here is, "What is required for a person to be accepted at Crestwood?" As you know, there are no entrance exams or litmus tests people must pass in order to place their membership here. We don't check references or quiz you on your Bible knowledge. But just because someone is a member here doesn't mean you have to accept them. I believe the challenge the Mission Statement gives us is to move from occupying the same space as others to accepting them as part of our church family. And that's not always easy to do.

Making that move to acceptance goes back to the promise we're given in scripture that each and every one of us is made in the image of God. Each and every one of us. The abused and the abuser. The victim and the convicted. The persecuted and the persecutor. The homeowner and the homeless. Every one of us. There are some folks that I would personally struggle with welcoming to the table each Sunday. But those personal biases are balanced by this quote from Rev. Sara Miles: "The surest sign of Jesus' real presence in communion is when there's someone completely inappropriate at the table." From week to week, that inappropriate person could be a

visitor, the person sitting next to you, or, depending on what you did the past week, it could be you. And yet, we are welcomed and accepted by Christ.

Not long after we approved these statements, we held a Maundy Thursday service. In attendance at that service was one particular man of whom I was keenly aware. Our church is part of a ministry called Mission Behind Bars and Beyond, which helps convicted felons who've served their sentence re-acclimate to society. It's a wonderful, life-giving ministry, and I'm proud Crestwood is part of it. This particular man was one of those we were helping, and I happened to know he had been convicted of a crime that I found reprehensible. But he's a child of God, so he was welcome at our service.

For this particular service, we were doing a hand-washing, a more acceptable version of the foot-washing Jesus did for his disciples. Each person came forward and presented their hands. I would look them in the eye and say a blessing, then I would gently wash each hand, both sides, slowly, lovingly. After one person finished, I looked up at the next person presenting their hands, and it was this man. I looked at his hands, the very hands that had committed this crime, and I felt myself questioning whether or not they deserved to be washed. Then I looked at him, and there were tears flowing down his face. He looked at me and said, "Please. Please." So I took those hands, and I washed each one, slowly, lovingly. And through my own tears, I told him, "Go in peace. Your sins have been forgiven."

Each week, we have people visiting with us, looking for a warm welcome, looking for a genuine experience of God, looking for their true selves, looking to know they are still loved, no matter what they've done. Is there room for them here? All of them? Paul says in Galatians that, because of Christ's ushering in of God's kingdom here on earth, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are made one in Christ Jesus." What categories would Paul add today to his list? There is no longer Republican or Democrat, there is no longer gay or straight, there is no longer black or white, there is no longer Cardinal fan and Wildcat fan...All means all. All are welcome and accepted.

I want to close by making this point: acceptance doesn't mean agreement. We don't have to believe the same way as another person to accept them. To accept them is to listen to them, to get to know them, to hear their story. That way, if you still disagree, it is grounded in your relationship with them, not uninformed judgments or prejudices. Is there space here at Crestwood for those conversations? Do we feel safe sharing with others our fears, our doubts, those things that others might deem unacceptable? We are called to be witnesses to God's love, the life-changing love we have received through Jesus Christ. We're not only called to love those we want to love; that would be too easy, and faith isn't meant to be easy. We're called to love all of God's people, especially those we judge to be unloveable. In doing so, we make God's kingdom real here on earth. Our Mission Statement calls us to welcome and accept all people. May the welcome and acceptance we extend to others reflect the welcome and acceptance we have received from our generous, gracious God.