

Imagine a Church Sermon Series  
Welcome and Accepts All People  
September 19, 2021  
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We're off and rolling on our sermon series taking a closer look at our Vision and Mission statements. Last week, we spent time with our Vision Statement, which is "connecting people with God and each other." We concluded that what people are most looking for is themselves, and that by connecting them with God and each other, the church can help them find what they are looking for. In this time of disconnection, it is more important than ever that we stay connected in whatever way is available to us in order to not lose ourselves and who we are in God's eyes.

So, 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 seven years now. It's time to ask how we're doing. 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. You'll receive a survey via email this week asking for you to share your thoughts on the sermon's focus. 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. Crestwood "welcomes and accepts all people." Now, I'm not naïve. I recognize very clearly the potential minefield into which we're about to step. I'm not expecting everyone to be in agreement about what this statement means. That's the challenge of a good, God-given Mission Statement. It calls a congregation out of their comfort zone into the wilderness places where their assumptions will be tested, their understanding of God expanded, and their faith deepened. Sure, we could take the easy way out and not wrestle with these kinds of issues. That would be safer. But I don't believe God is calling us to be safe, God is calling us to be faithful. This sermon, and all the ones in this series, are not meant to be definitive explanations but conversation starters.

"We welcome and accept all people." 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. Of course, it's harder to determine that these days, when we probably have more visitors logging on than signing the friendship pads. The nature of what it means to welcome and accept is changing. Nevertheless, I believe Crestwood is a welcoming church.

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 have a hard time welcoming someone who had hurt a child or an animal. Who would you have trouble welcoming? Each one of us has a limit to "all."

Here's something a tad shocking: despite the exemplary story I read from Genesis about hospitality, 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.

Thankfully, Jesus came along, telling 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, creating the fractured picture of Christianity we have today.

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. Otherwise, why would you start a new church? Do we think we're going to get to Heaven and God's going to say, "You know, everyone was wrong and the Little Hope Independent Non-Denominational Anti-Baptist Church in Beaver Creek got it right!" Everyone thinks they've got it right, 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.

Our denomination's former general minister and president, Sharon Watkins, relates a wonderful story about an experience with a family living in Appalachia. The family's dinner table was set in their large kitchen. At that table they gathered for meals and sharing the news of the day. The table was a rough-hewn one that was handmade, made up of boards of different textures and colors. When Watkins asked where the unique piece of furniture came from, the owner said, "I made it myself. Each time a new child comes into the family, I go out and cut another board for that table." They always made room for one more in their expanding family.

Each week, we have people visiting with us in person and online, 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 vaccinated or unvaccinated, there is no longer online or in-person...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.