

“Creating Community for All”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 10th, 2017

D Min Sermon #1, Year 1
Luke 14:12-24

Today we celebrate Welcome Sunday at Stouffville United Church! Welcome to you! Stouffville United Church likes to welcome! I read a report this summer from Ange Friesen. Ange is the Graphic Designer the church has contracted with to help brand an image for Stouffville United Church. Based on the congregation’s survey responses, she commented on the words that you used the most to describe Stouffville United Church. She wrote:

“What I heard over and over again from you [was] : Welcoming: By far this was the word you and the congregation used most often when answering the survey questions. If we combine the words welcome, welcoming, and welcomed, this was the #1 most commonly occurring word in your responses.

The second word was Inclusive – the intention to create a welcoming (there’s that word again), inclusive space where anyone and everyone can feel a sense of belonging is clear.”¹

You know the difference between a warm welcome and no welcome. We’ve had experiences of both. A warm welcome is wonderful. It helps you to make your way into the newness around you. And it brings with it an experience of belonging. It really is part of the human spirit to seek belonging. There is a joy to belonging.

In my childhood, I easily recall how every July for our family vacation, we drove to Florida to stay in a beach side motel in Daytona. We would eagerly anticipate the arrival at the Florida Welcome Center. We’d stop, stretch our legs and most importantly get the small dixie-sized cup of freshly squeezed Florida Orange Juice. I could taste that welcome.

Stouffville United was part of the Stouffville Cares community effort to welcome the Fandi family from Syria through a refugee sponsorship program. They arrived February 2015 in a snow storm. They were part of thousands of Syrian refugees welcomed to Canada that year. I will never forget when the family walked down the staircase at the airport motel and the tiny Stouffville Cares delegation said, Welcome to Canada. And as we drove from Highway 404 across Stouffville Side Road, we said to them in the car, Welcome to Stouffville.

Jesus loved to welcome. He loved to welcome those who no one else would welcome – the sick, the mentally ill, the shamed. And his example teaches how and who to welcome. As Christians, we are called to model his welcome, both individually and as a church.

John Pentland, minister to Hillhurst United in Calgary remarked in his book “Fishing Tips”, that the ‘Curious’, that category of people who are entering into a church for the first time to ‘check it out’, are the first to sense if there is a discrepancy between who you say you are and

¹ “Stouffville United Church Brand Visioning”, Ange Friesen, pg 1.

what they experience of you. Pentland gives the example of Unity Church whose tag line was: “A Church for Those Who Don’t Fit Church’ but where the kids are glared at for being noisy.² The same goes if you say you are a welcoming church and no one speaks to you at coffee time.

Millennials, the generation that many churches are missing in their Sunday morning congregation, are suspicious of ‘institutions’, the church being one of them. In a website article, ‘I’m a Millennial – This is the Kind of Church I Need’ (posted August 21, 2017), the author writes about the experience of being a millennial in the traditional church, who shows up on a Sunday morning and is met by everything *except* acceptance. They write, “We are looking for a spiritual community that welcomes weary travelers in their dysfunction, disappointment, and exhaustion.”³ In other words, take us as you find us.

In *your* experience, *are all people welcome* regardless of their skin colour, their age, their sexual identity, their economic status? You know, just as I do, how deeply **any** of these is a divider in this world.

We live in a world that is filled with “You do not belong” signs - from the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Burma, to the tension in the United States between black and white, in the ongoing discussion of carding by the Toronto police force, we live in a world where the ‘normative’ says to those who are not like them, ‘you do not belong’.

If you identify as LGBTQ, depending on where you live, you do not belong. My colleague Rev. Darren Liepold who is working in Australia in a Uniting Church congregation is devastated by the Australian government’s recent decision to hold a voluntary plebiscite on the issue of same-sex marriage. Darren is in Australia *with* his husband and is distressed by the torrent of hate literature being sent to the gay community. In the same vein, the United State’s decision to ban transgendered people from serving in the armed forces screams ‘You do not belong’.

And yet we find moments when *all people are welcome* regardless of their skin colour, their age, their sexual identity, their economic status. At the end of August, Hurricane Harvey devastated Texas with catastrophic rainfall. Large parts of Houston were underwater. Thousands upon thousands of people were displaced from their homes and found safety in relief shelters. And at the many community dinners that were dished out in those days, all were welcome to those tables, all belonged to those tables.

Stouffville United Church is learning what it means to live its vision of “Creating Community for All”. Jesus challenges and pushes the definition of what the ‘All’ includes. For Jesus welcomed those who were not welcome.

Jesus told parables about the Kingdom of God and our parable from Luke 14 is a complicated one for we are dealing with not one but two dinner party scenarios. In the first, Jesus tells us to not invite the people we know in case we are expecting something in return. But

² Fishing Tips, John Pentland, p. 183.

³ “I’m a Millennial – This is the Kind of Church I Need”, The Neighbourhood Liturgies, posted August 21, 2017 <https://www.theneighborhoodliturgies.com/blog/2017/8/20/gnlui75dj9ifdm5ol6zxfdr3jl0sf0>

he tells us to invite all the people you'd never think of inviting – like Food Bank clients and shelter guests.

The second dinner party adds a twist to the first scenario. The guest list has been set and the invitations sent out. Only no one is coming. They've all sent excuses why they can't attend. And the one giving the party is upset. It looks bad. And they say, 'Change of plans' and begin to invite all the people in town who would never have been on the guest list in the first place. The people who are in the 'you do not belong' zone of the community are now in the 'you belong' zone.

As one commentary summed it up, the 'presumption of privilege' has no place at the table that Jesus is setting. There will be nothing to distinguish us, whether that be race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and language.⁴

Jesus is saying that not everybody will be at his table. Those who turned down the invitation to the dinner will not be invited back. Seems harsh that Jesus wouldn't let them have a second chance. But the whole point of this story is that Jesus is undermining what was 'normative' in society, namely that your wealth or your status won't guarantee you a place at the table. But by giving to those who are unable to repay (vs. 14) *that* will get you a place at the table.

Jesus' table is right here. Do you recognize the lines from our scripture, "Come, for everything is ready!" These are the words that are part of the Holy Communion service where we share the bread and the wine of Christ's Last Supper. When the words 'Come, for everything is ready!' are said, it means that it is time to come to Jesus' table and the people are given some bread to eat and some wine to drink, remembering the words that Jesus offered them with.

And everyone is invited to this table with this invitation: "This is not the table of the United Church of Canada, nor is it the table of Stouffville United Church, but it is the table of Jesus Christ and *all* are welcome to this table."

Jesus is turning upside down the 'normative' of first Century social constructs, where the host invited only those who 'belonged', which did not include the poor, the blind and the lame. Jesus comes along and invites the poor, the blind and the lame. *These* are the people who are coming to my dinner, he says. These people are welcome to my table.

And Jesus is turning upside down the 'normative' of 21st century social constructs where the 'not welcome' become the 'welcomed'. Jesus in his words and actions challenges the social norms to transform what is 'normative, to bring a new 'normative' to this world, where 'All' doesn't mean 'some' but where 'All' means 'All'. And you are part of the 'All'. When you see a sign that says to you, 'You do not Belong', God in the same moment is replacing that with a new sign, 'You Belong'.

⁴ Feasting on the Word. Exegetical Perspective Year C, Vol 4, p. 25

And so, who will be at that table? Rev. Dr. Luke Powery, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina offers this glimpse of who will be at that table: “Having the *other* at the table is not just a nice thing to do. It is the right thing to do. In fact, it makes for a better table. Having people around the table who don’t look you us, act like us, talk like us, think like us, sing like us, dance like us, who are not us helps us to understand the beauty of God a bit better.”⁵

So who belongs to the table?

People who don’t look like us

belong at the table.

People who don’t act like us

belong at the table.

People who don’t talk like us

belong at the table.

People who don’t think like us

belong at the table.

People who don’t sing like us, dance like us

belong at the table.

And you belong at the table.

Everyone belongs at the table. Everyone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ www.textweek.com. https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Welcome%20Table_Revised%209-1-13.pdf