

“Grace and Welcome to All”  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO  
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**Romans 12:9-18**

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

**Hebrews 13:1-2**

<sup>1</sup>Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup>Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

*"We seek to be a congregation where spiritual growth is the norm, where growing in faith is expected, and that expects and respects a diversity of opinion. We will be a community of faith, radical in hospitality, outrageous in generosity and joyful in service to God and neighbor."*

Does that sound familiar to you? It is from the “Ministry and Vision Statement” of our church – this very congregation has crafted that message of who *we* seek to be.

It states in no uncertain terms that we are a welcoming church. We expect and respect a diversity of opinion, and we *will be* radical in hospitality, joyful in service to God and neighbor.

This kind of welcoming and radical hospitality is present in the other expressions of our church denomination, as well, in the Regional and General expressions of our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) family. And in practicing our vision for this welcoming and radical hospitality, every once in a while we need reminders and to clearly state again what exactly our vision as Disciples of Christ means in our practice of worship and in how our church and faith are lived out.

One of these reminders was just explored and affirmed last week at the Disciples General Assembly. Every two years the denomination gathers – ostensibly for business, but also for fellowship and to worship together as part of our larger family. We are a congregational denomination, meaning that congregations decide for themselves how to practice their church life, rather than a hierarchical leadership telling and mandating exactly how it should be done. Our Regional and General expressions of our church life provide support and guidance to congregations, but they never tell how or what. And so congregations send delegates to biennial General Assemblies to vote on the business of the church. Some of that business is operational for the administration of the denomination, such as where future General Assemblies will be held, or restructuring Regional lines. Some of it is for the assembly to hear reports from the General Units of the church on their ministry as part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) family, like the Disciples Home Missions unit, or the Council on Christian Unity. And then some of the business items take on the form of “Sense-of-the-Assembly” resolutions. These are resolutions that call the church to attention for specific topics, and, as is appropriate for Disciples who seek unity in Christ and not *uniformity* in belief, do not tell congregations what to do or what to think.

Why am I telling you all of this? This most recent Assembly that took place from last Saturday evening through Wednesday voted on a Sense-of-the-Assembly resolution named “Becoming a People of Grace and Welcome to All.” The summary is as follows: *The General Assembly calls upon the Church to recognize itself as striving to become a people of grace and welcome to all God’s children though differing in sexual orientation or gender identity, affirming that neither are grounds for exclusion from fellowship or*

*service within the church, and calling upon all expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), as a people of grace and welcome, to acknowledge their support for the welcome of and hospitality to all.*

This resolution sparked a lot of interest in our wider church family, and a lot of debate. It was an issue of potential division in our church family, partly because of misunderstanding about what the resolution actually means, and partly because congregations do not want other people to speak for them. This resolution does *not* tell congregations what to think or do – it *does* call on all church participants to be reminded that in a body in which we are *all* united in Christ, NO ONE should be excluded from fellowship.

We are a *welcoming* church, both congregation and denomination. We can say it and vote on it and post it on our walls and websites. But what does it actually *mean* for our Christian lives? The sad truth is that even though congregations around the world say that everyone is welcome, it still happens that a person can come to that church and not *feel* welcome. It might be because another worshipper gives her a funny look because she's not dressed the "right way," or because she sits in a pew which another worshipper has tended to think of as her own "regular spot." A person might not feel welcome because he does not look like anyone else around him. Or because he does not speak like anyone else around him. Sometimes, a person does not feel welcome because she thinks that she will be judged harshly for the way that she lives her life – she might not have the right job, or the right amount of money, or she might love the wrong person. It might even be a child who is greatly loved by the congregation, but who is not given the tools to worship God along with the adults.

There are so many reasons why a person stepping through the doors of a church might not feel welcome. And it is up to *us* to learn those reasons and to work *as hard as we can* to change them.

The General Assembly adopted a resolution saying that we as a church family would seek to become a people of grace and welcome to all, but who cares about a resolution? It does not mean *anything* unless we are putting welcome into practice in every single way of which we can conceive.

I confess, I didn't want that resolution to be put before the Assembly. It broke my heart for the vote to be called for "Ayes" and "Nays" and to hear so many of each loudly proclaimed. I believe without a doubt that that resolution was put forward out of extreme love, not to divide the church but to heal it in unity, but the truth is that our system, like our world, is broken, and in attempting to be a prophetic church that seeks to rebuke evil and uphold righteousness above all else, we still fail to achieve God's awesome and all-encompassing reconciliation. And so we still strive for it by doing the best we can to live it out in our lives – in our lives as part of a congregation, in our jobs, in our families, in our friendships, and *especially* in our relationships with strangers.

Because of course, church is not the only place in which we practice *welcome*. If we as a congregation are to be Radically Hospitable, it must be practiced in our daily lives, too.

Grace is not something to be accepted and then ignored. Grace must be lived out. Just like "welcome" is not something to be stated, and then ignored. Welcome, *because of God's grace for all*, must be *lived out* for all, in as many ways as possible.

We can say we are welcoming to all, but we must look for creative ways to live that out. We must attempt to recognize where we are not welcoming, and change it, and we have to do it together. Not just the pastoral leadership, not just the board. We must be a part of a congregation that seeks to recognize find God's grace for all and let that lead us to action, not passivity.

We must be aware of each other. We must listen to each others stories, and find ways to surround ourselves by people whose stories we have not heard anything like. It is by listening to stories that we are called to action. It is by listening and being convicted.

The Bible has something to say about that, doesn't it? Look at our Scripture for today – Romans 12 says, in a different version than what's in your bulletin, Romans 12:9-10 *Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.* And in another of Paul's letters, Philippians chapter 2 vs 4 – *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.*

You will be welcoming when you give hospitality to all strangers, whether they look like you or not, whether you have *anything* in common or not. Find out who they are, and *listen* to their stories. That's what welcoming will be.

And you know, that's what Christ was all about! It was amazing, actually. Christ didn't have a building to welcome people into – he did not have one synagogue in which he participated regularly, and he did not even have a *home*. Christ had no place of his “own” to welcome people into, but he still embodied *radical hospitality*. He was welcoming to all – he *lived* with all people, asked all people to join with him, and made them feel so much that he wanted to know them, that he cared for them, that every single person was deserving of God's *grace*. Not only of God's grace and love, but of being *called* to lead a life fulfilling God's desires for that kingdom of God that we all strive for. No one is excluded from that call. It is a call of discipleship of which every single person is worthy, from age 0 to 150.

My question for you today is, do we treat people as if they are worthy of God's call? Do we *love* them enough that we want to share that call with them? That we trust God's call in their lives?

That's something that convicts *me* often. I might say that I am welcoming to all people, but if I am not acting as if God has a call for their lives, I am not living up to the welcome and to the hospitality and love that Jesus exemplified for us.

Jesus called *all people* – Pharisees, tax collectors, prostitutes, widows, children, the wealthy, the poor, the lost and the righteous, to learn more about God and follow God's love.

Our call as a church cannot be less than Christ's example. Our call is to *live out* God's grace and welcome to all.

I want you to think of a person in this world who you do not agree with. You might not agree with their ideas. You might not agree with the way they live their lives.

You might not even agree with how they treat other people. Now I want you to imagine Jesus going to that person, and giving them the incredible honor of spending time with them. Healing their illnesses, sharing a meal with them. Welcoming them into God's love, wherever he was. And now, imagine *yourself* welcoming that person with absolute openness. Inviting him or her into your home, talking, and listening to that person's story. Not with an agenda – the only reason is to welcome them in the spirit of Jesus Christ your Lord.

We are not truly welcoming if it's only on certain terms. If a person does this one thing, or doesn't do this other thing. We cannot be welcoming *only if* a person is going to be a part of our congregation's ministries. We cannot be welcoming *only if* a person is old enough, *only if* a person is clean enough. We cannot even be welcoming *only if* a person is *also* welcoming to all of God's people. We are welcoming when all means ALL, and when we are constantly looking for ways to live out our welcome.

Who are we welcoming to? Are there any people or groups who we say it in words but not in action? (multi-cultural; poor; homeless; children; old, young, middle aged; women, men; leaders, followers; disabled; republicans, democrats, and all political beliefs...)

Do we treat people as if they are worthy of God's call? Do we *love* them enough that we want to share that call with them, that we trust God's call in their lives?

We are a welcoming church; we must continue to live that out by looking for ways to be more and more so, and to show that all means ALL.

Amen.