

2021 09 12 – Welcoming the Spirit

Today is Welcome Sunday. Every year, on the second Sunday of September we sing “Come In, Come In and Sit Down” and we welcome everyone back from summer holidays. We welcome our seniors who have been off visiting their families, we welcome the choir who have had a break from weekly practices, we welcome the folks who have been camping at our provincial parks and we welcome the children who have returned for Sunday School. After service we have a potluck lunch and get caught up on everyone’s news. It’s like a big family reunion!

This year, of course, is different. Yes, we sang the same hymn, there are people here that we haven’t seen in a long time and there are a few children heading off to Sunday School. But, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the congregation isn’t able to belt out that hymns like we usually do, there are only 3 people in the choir, we’re all wearing masks and, most importantly, many of us are livestreaming the service from home. It’s a Welcome Sunday like we’ve never had before.

In the midst of this pandemic and, in particular, during the planning for this service, one of the things I’ve been asking myself is, “What does it mean to be welcoming when not everyone can be in the church building?” Is there something more we should be doing, even when this pandemic is over? Yes, our doors are open, we have greeters and ushers but maybe that’s not enough.

Maybe being welcoming isn't just about getting people into the building. Maybe it's about creating a family that goes beyond the physical limitations of bricks and mortar. Maybe it's creating a church that is inviting to everyone, including those who, for whatever reason, cannot be here on a Sunday morning. If that's true, what would that kind of welcome look like? What would those of us who are here in the pews every Sunday need to do?

In today's scripture passage, Jesus has something to say about what it means to be welcoming. He and his disciples have been journeying through Galilee preaching the good news and healing the sick. Obviously the disciples are feeling pretty good about themselves because on the way home to Capernaum they start arguing about their status within the group. Can't you just hear them:

- Jesus asked me to go with him when he healed that little boy, I must be very important
- I was the one who held the scroll while Jesus read... he obviously trusts me the most
- John and I were sent off to a nearby village to preach – It's clear we are way above the rest of you.

When they get to Capernaum, Jesus plays dumb and asks, "What were you discussing on the way home?" Of course, the silence is deafening. None of them want to admit that they had been arguing about their own importance.

Obviously Jesus had overheard their conversation since he took the twelve aside and said, "If any of you wants to be first, you must be the last one of all and at the service of all."

So what does that mean for me? What does it mean to be the last one of all? Does it mean I'm not going to always be able to sit in my favourite pew? Does it mean the music on Sunday morning is not always going to be my hit list? Does it mean that some of my favourite parts of worship will be left out or changed so others can be safe? Does he mean we may have to spend money to buy better computers and cameras so the folks at home can feel like they are a part of this family too? Yes, being at the service of all, means thinking and acting for others first. Yes to all of that and more too. My guess is that he was talking about a lot more than worship.

Jesus then brought a little child into their midst, putting his arm around the child, said to them, "Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake, welcomes me." I believe Jesus is using the child as an example of someone who has very little status in their society. He is telling his disciples, and us, that we are to spend our time, our talent and our money welcoming those who need our help, those who have no power in our society.

Yesterday morning, as I sat in my office writing this sermon, I heard the voices of little children coming from the main entrance of the church building. It was wonderful to hear those young excited voices once again. This particular group was heading up to the gym for cheerleading practice, and we also have scouts, girl guides and a fencing club using our building during the week. These walls are once again resounding with the energetic voices and the pounding feet of our children and youth.

Yes, as a congregation, we are already welcoming the children of this city into our building, but I think we need to ask ourselves, who is being left out? Who is not being welcomed? Are there ways we could reach out into the community instead of expecting them to come to us? I know that Jackie is planning to offer at-home Sunday School kits for those families who are not yet comfortable coming back to worship. Faith Formation worked with the schools to offer a poetry webinar that would fit into their curriculum. Are these programs that we could continue even after the pandemic is over? What else could we be doing?

Of course, Jesus was not just talking about children. He was no doubt emphasizing the importance of feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless and healing for the sick. Our congregation already reaches out in many ways to those in need in our community and beyond. This morning you just heard about the wonderful work of our Refugee Sponsorship Working Group. But we should never stop asking, "What else can we do?" "What need is not being met?"

Jesus also said, "And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me." Whenever we reach out to one of God's beloved children, whoever they may be, we welcome not just them, but also the Spirit, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Essence of Love. We are welcoming the Spirit not just into this sacred space, but also into our own hearts and our own lives. Whenever we reach out to welcome another person, we are reaching out to welcome the Spirit of Love

Welcoming the Spirit definitely involves creating what church experts are now calling hybrid worship. They are telling us that today's worship service is just the beginning of what may become our new normal. Churches around the world are figuring out ways to worship in person while welcoming people on-line at the same time. I want to give a huge thank you to Brent Molyneux, Charles Lotochinski and Rhonda Lotochinski for setting up our livestreaming service for this Sunday. Please know this is just the beginning and it is our hope to make this experience even better so that the people at home can feel even more connected, even more a part of our family..

There are so many ways that we can open our doors to welcome the Spirit into this community of faith. I challenge you to come up with your own idea and then to make it happen. Let this be a welcoming place for all of God's children, for the whole people of God.