

The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.

We have all seen the signs that say that. Sometimes they are on church property. Sometimes they are small signs placed by a roadside to announce a nearby Episcopal Church. I take great comfort knowing that our church has chosen that simple statement as its tag line.

In the late 80s, and early 90s there was a prominent arm of the Episcopal Church that was called the Church Ad Project. It produced 90 or so ads that could be run in newspapers, or bought as small posters. They all seemed to follow the same format, more or less. They would often have an image accompanied by an, honestly, rather snarky headline.

One I remember quite well is a poster with an image of an infant with the headline, "Our church welcomes you. Regardless of race, creed, color or the numbers of times you've been born."

The ad makes a point. But frankly I prefer a more gentle statement like, "All are welcome." or one I find myself telling visitors frequently, "You are always welcome here." Part of the mission of the church is to open her doors, and welcome whomever God sends through them.

This week we have a passage from the Gospel of Matthew that stresses that welcoming spirit numerous times. In just fourteen verses we have at least four moments when Jesus exhibited a welcoming spirit, a radically welcoming spirit.

First he calls Matthew to follow him. Matthew was a tax collector. He would have been despised as one who was betraying his Jewish roots by serving Rome, as well as defiling himself by associating with heathen.

No sooner had Jesus called Matthew that we are told Jesus was sharing a meal with tax collectors, and sinners. We are not told what sins these folk had committed. Instead they are simply described as sinners, as if that is the only way they were perceived by others. Jesus, though, perceived them much more graciously.

During that dinner Jesus is summoned by a man of stature within the Jewish community. His daughter had died, and he was seeking Jesus' miraculous abilities to raise her. As the story unfolds we hear that Jesus boldly acts, even to the consternation of others.

In doing so he reaches forth, and takes hold of a dead child's hand. According to the belief of Jews in Jesus' time, that single act would have made him unclean, and the source of scorn.

While he is going to tend to this poor child he is pursued by a woman who suffered from a chronic hemorrhage. Blood was, much as it is today, a powerful substance in Jesus' culture. Just being touched by this woman would have defiled Jesus, and placed him outside the community's regard.

Through each of these events, within acts of volition, and within circumstances beyond his control, our Lord would have found himself deemed outside of God's favor. Yet there is not a hint in any of these events of Jesus showing anything but grace and concern for all those around him.

Now surely there is more to our work, our mission than simply welcoming someone. Last week we heard the word's of our Lord as he ascended into heaven,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and
of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching

them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

The church is not simply about a universal welcome. It is also a place where all of us seek to know God, to grow in God, to serve our God. All are welcome. All are invited, All are welcome, and invited to share our faith, our beliefs, and our ministries.

Recently I was speaking with a parishioner who said that St Paul's had been quite welcoming, and accepting. The person went on to say that it was a bit shocking when I was asked how to become a member. I was reminded that my reply was basically, "You are already a member."

The Episcopal Church, for all its liturgical beauty and practices really doesn't have much of a way to mark the arrival, and acceptance of new members. Surely the rites of Baptism and Confirmation are useful but they are not as practical, or practicable for the day to day, or week to week welcoming of visitors, and new members.

I suppose this could be seen as a criticism of our beloved church. However, I believe it is instead, the unfortunate byproduct of our gracious, and radical effort to simply welcome everyone.

All are welcome. All are invited.

There is so much in our Gospel reading this morning. We hear so much about Jesus' concern and graciousness towards all. What we don't hear is much of a rehearsal of why each of these people were suspect. We hear nothing of penance, or guilt.

Instead the overarching tone is that Jesus seeks, welcomes, and accepts everyone. Including you. You are always welcome here.