

Beyond Welcoming: Do No Harm

Matthew 15:21-28

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A few years ago, I preached a sermon series called “Our Next Faithful Step”. The basic idea was that the church can never be complacent or static as long as there is war, poverty, oppression, hunger, and people who are suffering and marginalized because God created the church to further God’s kingdom. The church is always called to counter hate with love, violence with non-violence, fear with hope, hunger with food, thirst with clean, life-giving water.

Since the world and its needs are constantly changing, we, as the church, must always be asking, “What is our next faithful step in growing God’s kingdom?” Who is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do?

Given the diversity of work the church is called to, we may ask that question about all sorts of topics in congregational life. What is our next faithful step in offering Christ’s love to our community and to the world? What is our next faithful step in building the church for our children and our children’s children? What is our next faithful step in reaching out to and supporting each other? What is our next faithful step in creating meaningful worship?

Right now, with the start of a new program year just a few weeks away, I’ve been asking myself and God “What is our next faithful step in being a welcoming community?” As visitors and newcomers enter into our community, what is our next faithful step in making this place feel like a safe place, a place to belong, to whomever comes to worship, learn, or serve with us this fall?

Of course, this is a good time to dust off our hospitality skills, remembering to wear our nametags, greet people warmly, and talk with people we don’t know in worship and Connections. Fall is a great time to invite friends and neighbors to church or invite a newcomer to a church event (like our ReConnect Kick-off Event on September 22).

Yet, as a congregation, we know that to be truly welcoming goes beyond these measures. In 2007, as we considered passing our welcoming statement, we came to understand that to be welcoming is to seek to be a community that is open and affirming to all of God’s children. Our first welcoming statement was primarily focused on LGBTQ+ folks. The statement was something we were proud of, and it guided some important decision-making over the years. Then, in the wake of the racial reckoning that began with the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a subgroup of the Leadership Council updated the welcoming statement with an eye to making it more broadly inclusive and descriptive. The result was the statement we print on our bulletins and lead with on our website - a picture of who we are as well as who we aspire to be.

We seek to know God. We are grounded in unconditional love. We affirm all persons. We learn from one another as we follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, an outsider who tore down dividing walls and calls us to unity. We are progressive, relevant, and committed to seeking peace and building hope through worship, service, social justice, and education. No matter where you are

on your faith journey, or how you worship, we welcome you to help us build our community. This includes all races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, ages and stages of life, abilities and disabilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Yet, a lot has changed since 2007, even since 2020. Same gender marriage is now legal, we have become much more aware of gender identity, we've made our way through the fear and isolation of a global pandemic, our denomination is finally moving forward after years of conflict over LGBTQ+ inclusion, we've become painfully aware of the violence unjustly inflicted on people of color, and as a country we've begun talking not just about welcoming but about equity, inclusion, and belonging. So, as we look at our welcoming statement, what does being a welcoming congregation look like now? What is our next faithful step in creating a culture at FUMC where we not only welcome all people, we seek to know them, affirm them, and give them a seat at the table?

Most of what I am going to share with you today comes from conversations I have had with people in our congregation who are part of non-dominant communities - members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, and those who are disabled, in which I've asked them what they see as our next faithful steps in moving beyond welcoming. What I have learned from them reminded me of John Wesley's three simple rules for Methodists - do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. For the next few weeks, we'll be looking at how we might apply those rules as we think about moving beyond welcoming to inclusion and belonging.

As we start with "do no harm", I want to state plainly that I know we are not people who seek to harm others. As Christians, we understand that we are called to love our neighbor. But, there is an uncomfortable truth here, as well. We all do harm to others without intending to and usually without even realizing it. Our scripture reading today is an example of what I mean. Even Jesus, in all his beautiful humanity, had a moment of realizing that he was harming someone else by limiting his worldview to what he knew from his Jewish upbringing.

According to Jewish law, gentiles were impure. They worshiped idols rather than the Jew's one God, which made them a threat to the purity of the Jewish people. So, when the Canaanite woman - a gentile - called out to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter, he initially just ignored her. When she persisted, he made the difference between them very clear, telling her he was there to minister only to the Jewish people, not others. His language in saying "it's not good to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs" makes us bristle. Yet, Jesus spoke out of his own context, with language and values he learned from his community - just as we do. This story reminds us that we all have a framework for how we view others that comes from our own upbringing and experiences. We almost always begin our interactions with people we meet from what we know and understand about the world.

What Jesus does, though, in this conversation with the Canaanite woman is to be open to hearing her perspective. Rather than backing down when Jesus dismissed her, she challenged him. This woman, who had no power, no agency, essentially no rights, responded to him saying, "but dogs at least get the master's crumbs". With that, Jesus realized how his bias, formed while growing up within his culture, was harmful to her. He instantly changed his mind, praised her faith, and healed her daughter. At that moment, Jesus opened up God's kingdom to include her and all God's people.

As we look at our next faithful step as a welcoming community, Jesus reminds us that we all have bias or fear or discomfort that we may not even be aware of. That is the human condition, and because of it, we will all at some time or other do harm, unconsciously or unintentionally.

Much of the harm we cause comes from the words we say. We speak before we think. We don't consider how what we say might be heard by a person very different from ourselves. Yet, those interactions give us the opportunity to practice what our mothers taught us - to think before we speak, to look within ourselves and ask, "Am I approaching this person with an open heart and am I leading with respect?"

An open heart means being genuinely curious, not assuming that I know or can judge this person's life, experience, and worldview. An open heart means listening deeply when a person shares their experience or emotions and not denying their reality or trying to convince them to feel differently. An open heart means remembering that we use broad categories to describe people - LGBTQ+, people of color, people who are disabled. Yet, each person we meet has their own story of what it means to feel like "the other". And an open heart means recognizing that whatever discomfort I feel, a person from a non-dominant community probably feels much more discomfort in our conversation.

Leading with respect is just what it sounds like - starting with authentic respect for the other person. When someone offers you some insight into who they are and how they experience or see the world, honor what they tell you. For example, if a person of color shares with you that they have experienced microaggressions at church, a harmful response would be to say "oh no, that couldn't happen here. We're not like that." A respectful response would be to ask what that means, ask for an example, and affirm their experience. If a trans person tells you their pronouns, a harmful response would be to ignore them because it communicates that you don't accept or respect their identity. A respectful response is to make an effort to use their pronouns, even if it's uncomfortable. If an elderly or disabled person tells you they feel invisible, the harmful response would be to say, "Oh of course you're not." But to lead with respect would be to take the time to listen to what that means and ask how we as a community might behave differently to affirm their sacred worth.

Leading with respect also means acknowledging when you have made a mistake and apologizing without suddenly making the conversation about you. For example, if you use the wrong pronoun for a trans person, just correct yourself without apologizing profusely or explaining why because the more you do those things, the more you shift the conversation to yourself rather than trans person.

There are, of course, many other examples of how we can be like Jesus with the Canaanite woman and be open and respectful in our interactions with people who have been marginalized. Some of the examples I've given today may feel really challenging, others may seem obvious or pedantic. Yet, these are real suggestions from real people in our congregation, and all of them are steps we can take to move beyond our welcoming statement to creating a church culture that genuinely feels welcoming. Each is a faithful step closer to embodying the kingdom of God.

May it be so. Amen.

