

All Are Welcome Here

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-4; Luke 15:1-2, 25-32

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
June 27, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

All are welcome here - to this congregation; to our worship; to this Table of our Lord.

Shouldn't that be obvious? Isn't that taken for granted? We are a Christian Church, after all; of course, all are welcome here, or should be.

But, of course, it cannot be taken for granted and in practice it simply is not true for the Christian Church at large – All are not welcome, at least not unless they conform to whatever the prevailing ethos of a given Church may be.

This is what made Jesus' behavior so revolutionary - he broke the social customs, overturned the conventional wisdom, embraced all manner of persons and excluded none. That is old hat at Christ Community. The gracious acceptance of all has been a hallmark of this place for nearly three decades and the grace we have purveyed is the grace I personally received when in 1971 this congregation invited me to return to be their pastor, even though I was at that time going through a divorce and in a struggle for the custody of our children. In 1971 that was a daring decision. Divorce was still stigmatized in the Church and clergy divorce almost unheard of.

I experienced grace tangibly; it changed my life and it became the mark of my ministry. When we speak of Christ Community as an alternative to Church as usual, that is what we point to - the grace that we offer to all and any who desire to be part of this community. For all these years I have been working out a theology of grace, discovering the implications of grace.

Acceptance, embrace without fear of rejection - that's what everyone desires and needs. Whether our lives unfold without a wrinkle or whether we find ourselves in a situation we never intended or could even conceive of, the one thing we desperately need, and the only thing that can heal us and move us on toward wholeness is the unconditional love and gracious acceptance by another and by a community which enables us to believe in ourselves and know we are valued.

The Church has been very slow to learn this, act it out and thus mirror the grace that was lived out by Jesus. The Gospel lesson from Luke 15 portrays a conflict situation. Jesus' open table fellowship, which was a hallmark of his ministry, demonstrating his embrace of all, caused the religious leaders to grumble and their grumbling triggered perhaps Jesus' most memorable parable, called the parable of the prodigal son, although it is really a story of the unconditional love of God.

The story is familiar; the younger son asks for and receives his portion of the father's estate, goes off to a far country, spends all in reckless living and finally, hitting bottom, returns to the father to plead for mercy to be accepted as a hired servant. You know the story - the father sees the son coming while he is still afar off, runs to him, embraces him with tears of joy. No talk of servanthood; rather, the father orders a great party because his son has come home.

The Gospel lesson then records the reaction of the elder brother who had stayed home, faithfully worked the farm and done it all right. He comes upon the party and he is angry, protesting to the father that in all his years of faithful service there had never been a party for him. And now this wild one returns and there is joy, music, dancing and a great feast. The elder brother, in spite of the father's assurance of love and pleading that he join the party, refuses to go in.

That was Jesus' response to the religious leaders who grumbled at his open table, his inclusion of the excluded ones. And that story is the heart of the Gospel of the grace of God as understood in the Christian faith. It is also the understanding of God in what I think is one of the most beautiful portions of the Hebrew scripture - II Isaiah, where we find the Servant Songs, poems describing the mission of God's servant. In 42:1-4, the servant is one who will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. It is not an accident that Jesus found his identity and the nature of his mission in those Servant Songs.

Why is it that the Church acts more often in the spirit and posture of the elder brother? Why has the Church so often been marked by a judgmental spirit of condemnation and exclusion rather than by the gracious inclusivity that marked the life of Jesus?

Why are we so threatened by those whose race or ethnicity or sexual orientation differs from ours? Why can we not see the common humanity that transcends such superficial and accidental differences?

The religious grumblers of Luke 15 criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, but that was not a moral issue; rather, those excluded were ritually impure according to the religious practice of the day. In other words, they were different, they didn't fit the mold.

Why is grace so difficult to come by?

I mentioned the grace extended to me when I was called here, even though going through a divorce. A young couple came to me to be married; one from this congregation, one from another. The one from the other congregation acknowledged he had asked his pastor about being married by a divorced minister and he assured me that his pastor said that he could rest easy because in divorce, I must have been the innocent party. And I knew at that moment that that was wrong - I knew in that moment that a minister of the Gospel of the grace of God should have known that in human relationship there are no innocent parties, but even so, had I been the chief offender, would that have forever after made me a moral leper, unable to be a servant of Christ?

Some years ago a fine Christian gentleman, a professional, came to me to acknowledge alcoholism. He sought treatment and was experiencing a solid recovering mode. He related how hurt he was when a Christian friend, a professional man, took him aside, assuring him that there was forgiveness.

He didn't need forgiveness; he needed recovery and, as AA demonstrates so powerfully, that comes best by the gracious acceptance of others who lay on no guilt, but give encouragement on the road to sobriety.

I suspect there is no more volatile issue facing the institutional Church in its respective denominational groupings than the matter of sexual orientation. Denominations are in turmoil, threatening to split over the issue, clergy are being put on trial in ecclesiastical assemblies for blessing same-sex unions, and Church synods become battlegrounds between those who advocate the full recognition and rights of gay/lesbian people and those who condemn them.

A week ago there was a piece in the Grand Rapids Press about the Christian Reformed Synod which called the Church to repentance for its failure to minister to gay/lesbian folk. But, the Synod affirmed a 1973 report on homosexuality that, for its time, was ahead of its time, but which still held that the expression of one's sexuality in a same-sex relationship was sin. And then one of the more compassionate spokespersons explained the Synod's counsel to the churches - love the sinner, not the sin, and I just shook my head and murmured, "They just don't get it." That won't work. If my sexual orientation is a given and my expression of it is reflective of my person, you can't love me but not my expression of who I am.

What hurt, what pain we have inflicted on persons simply for being who they are.

Professor David Myers of Hope College's Psychology Department and a deeply committed Christian, has just written an excellent piece in *Perspectives* which I would be happy to pass along to any of you who honestly wonder about this matter.

... Can we, should we, relax and believe that, regardless of our sexual orientation, God loves us "just as I am"? Can we accept our own and others' sexual orientation without excusing promiscuity, exploitation, or self-destructive behavior? Can we regard bathhouses and brothels, gay bars and strip joints, as similarly degrading? Can we accept gays who, not given what Catholics call the gift of celibacy, elect the functional equivalent of marriage (which society denies them) over promiscuity? To merit our acceptance must they live alone? Can our family values include love, care, loyalty, and respect for a son or daughter who may be predisposed to homosexuality? And might we Christians benefit from praying Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer?

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

This is Gay Pride Month. I'm sorry there needs to be such an observance, but until persons of homosexual orientation are treated as they are, simply human beings reflecting the diversity of human sexuality, such observances will be necessary.

We've seen that lady of great dignity, Rosa Parks, in the news recently. She received the highest civilian award from the President for the part she played in the Civil Rights Movement, being the catalyst for black protest when one day she refused to go to the back of the bus.

Can we even imagine the indignity of Jim Crow laws today? Look how long we lived with that horrible injustice inflicted on black people. And while racism is alive and well, no normal person with a modicum of humanity would think of re-instituting such racist legislation.

And one day I trust it will be the same for people of homosexual orientation. Until then, the cause must be carried on by all people of good faith.

We didn't like Civil Rights marches and black power activity in the 60s'. We don't like gays/lesbians acting up. We would rather coexist with injustice and inhumanity. But, the time is long overdue, and until the time comes, I will wear a ribbon as a sign of my commitment to equal rights for all people, in this case, for the gay/lesbian community.

Martin Luther said,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. *Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved.* To be steady on all battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

This is not an optional issue for the Church; it is a test of its authenticity, of its commitment to justice and the grace of inclusiveness.

Let me tell you honestly - I am sick at heart at the ignorance and arrogance of the Church. I nearly despair. I am torn, deeply torn. Were it not for this community and thus my experience of what a powerful influence for good, for human healing and well-being a faith community can be, I would leave the Church. I am so blessed to have this ministry. It is who I am; my best gifts are utilized, my passion given focus. But, were it not for you, I would give up.

Yet, the one we follow would not give up and for that he got executed, But that was not the end of the story, for those who followed remembered him as he said and in the center of the Church has been a Table with bread and wine symbolizing body and blood, body and blood separated which points to execution - violent death - and we are invited to take bread and cup as sign of our solidarity with him, with his cause, and in solidarity with all who desire to gather here, making a renewed commitment to be the body of Christ, a sign of God's reign, a community of justice, grace and peace.