



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

What We Value: Welcoming

A second sermon in the series on UMCG Values by Pastor Rob Hamilton.

Delivered on January 15, 2023 on Luke 18:15-17 NRSVUE

15 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. 16 But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 17 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Value: Welcoming: We invite our community into our home with open arms.

Preamble

As I mentioned last week, for the next several Sundays we are going to ground ourselves in the Gospel for the implementation of our Moving Forward Initiative that we began last year. In fact, it was about this time last year that Ministry Architects did a church-wide assessment - a diagnostic of the challenges facing our church. That report led to an initiative to start making changes that have stopped the decline of our church and has even started to show elements of new life and growth.

This past fall, we invited the whole church to a Moving Forward Summit where we set out to collectively name our mission, values, and goals for the coming year. Because we took a grass-roots approach, where we get input from the congregation in developing the direction of the congregation, instead of leadership hashing it out and selling it to the church, it has taken us a few months to get it all ready to go. And for the next few weeks, what I want to do in worship is to ground us in the gospel-roots in the values that make our church come alive and seek to embody in 2023.

As part of the grassroots process last fall, we had an open invitation to all to attend our Summit and 60 people showed up on a Friday night in September to do this important work. This group came up with a list of 49 values - everyone had a say, but then we had to all vote on which values were most important. Six values came to the top, that means some didn't even use their votes for their own suggested values. The top-voted value was inclusion and we said of **inclusion at UMCG: That we boldly love and accept people for who they are.** My message last week explored this value and today we're going to look at the second highest



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ranked value of **“Welcoming”** where we defined it to mean that: **“We invite our community into our home with open arms.”**

A lot of people or groups are welcoming so what I hope to do today is to root welcoming in the Gospel, so that our values are reflected to the world Spirit of Jesus. Let's pause for prayer as we dive deep into the gospel and welcoming. Let's pray:

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,

Thank you for your Spirit that is set loose upon all flesh. I thank you for your Spirit that moves in this church through the Moving Forward Initiative calling us to find a new identity and calling in you. Keep your Spirit moving in us now, in my words, in their hearing and in their doing - that we might follow your Spirit's leading faithfully as your people called United Methodist of Geneva. Amen.

Sermon

A few years ago, I was asked by the District Superintendent to preside over an Annual Conference in a small town west of here. DS's typically only call-in substitutes like Pastor Lisa or I to preside at churches whose annual business is expected to be by the book and uncontroversial. This church conference was indeed not just by the book, but pleasant. The church was reaching out into their community and proud of their new outreach thanks in part to a new, energetic young pastor. The pastor was in their second year and the SPRC really had constructive positive things to say about this young pastor. I was wrapping up with the SPRC and the chairperson said, “there is one thing we do want the DS to know about our pastor. We really like them. Their family is lovely. Their family is nearby so they often go and have lunch on Sundays with their extended family back in the suburbs.”

Being a pastor-dad with young kids and having extended family in the area, I felt myself getting ready to make a defense for this pastor and was internally debating whether to dig deeper or just pass this back to the DS. The SPRC chair took my two deep breaths of silence as an opportunity to continue what was clearly a complaint. “We think it's great that pastor has family in the area, but they go like every Sunday and sometimes on Saturdays too.” Now I was starting to get confused on the nature of the problem, so I start scanning the faces in the room. It's clear that the chairperson was speaking with charity and on behalf of the whole committee, so I listened more deeply as they continued, “It just feels like they don't like it here in our town. It would be nice if pastor and family would have



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lunch after church at the local cafe or grab a slice of pie on the weekend. You know, to get to know our community, outside of the pastor role.”

Now, this pastor started an after-school reading enrichment program and was meeting lots of families in this small town. I know this pastor was making plenty of effort getting to know the community and was excelling at it and the church even celebrated it. So I was a bit confused and so I decided to pass off this conversation to the DS, but before I could respond that I would let the DS know, a question popped into my head: I asked it to the chairperson in a way that also addressed the whole committee, “well, has anyone invited Pastor and family to join them for lunch at the cafe after church?”

The chairperson did the RCA dog head tilt thing while they thought about my question and everyone else was searching their memory. Glances and whispers spread around the room. The chairperson responded with both relief and chagrin as they all realized that their perceived problem wasn’t with their pastor. The problem was of their own making. In real time they realized no one in the room had ever thought to invite the pastor and their family out for lunch after church.

I then told a story about how everyone can be nice and polite, but until someone from the in-group invites and escorts an outsider into the in-group they’ll almost always be on the outside. The committee started solving their own problem in real-time. The chair said they were inviting the pastor for lunch the coming Sunday. Another committee-member said they host a bonfire and hayride for the community. It’s an informal thing that everyone knows they are invited (if you grew up in the area, you know this) and this farmer said he was going to make sure pastor knew about it. And he was a man of his word, I saw him make the invitation later that night. It’s one thing to be nice and friendly to people when they happen to be near you; it’s another to invite someone in and escort them in with open arms as an act of welcome.

Churches across America claim to be welcoming, but having been to quite a few churches, my experience is that most all churches are friendly - nice and polite but few invite people to join and welcome people with open arms to escort outsiders into the in-group. In fact, in college, I filled in for a pastor and Meghan tagged along. There were 8 people in worship at this church. They all seemed nice. As I shook their hands at the end of service, they said be sure to have some cookies in fellowship hall - they were very nice and polite about it. Meghan and I had to find our own way to the fellowship hall (wasn’t hard, to follow all 8 of them) and no one talked to us or invited us to sit with them. It was clear we were not



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welcomed and so we ate our cookie quickly and left in a hurry. No wonder there were only 8 people in that church - which has since closed since those college days.



If anything, I think a lot of churches are like the disciples and children. The kids in the story with innocence wanted to come to Jesus, but those grown-up disciples fenced them out. It's like you must earn your keep with the in-group. But Jesus wouldn't have any of it. I imagine Jesus opening his arms to the kids as he corrects his disciples saying

“Let them

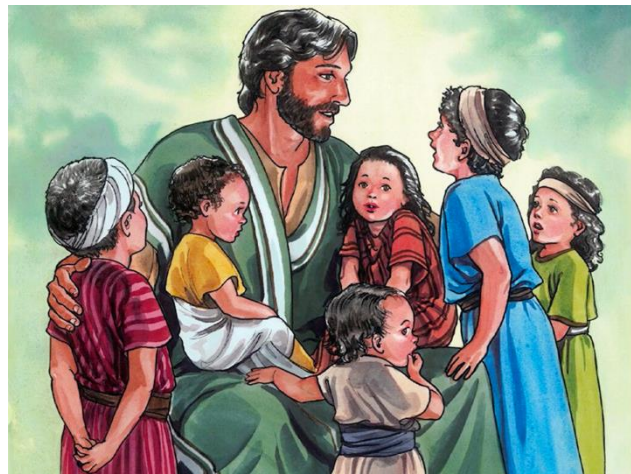
come unto me” after all one can only enter the kingdom of God if they do so like these children.

Notice how often little kids like to play and once they feel safe will just start playing together, even if they are meeting a fellow little tyke for the first time?

Jesus got a lot of invitations from insiders and outsiders alike to join them for dinner. Remember, wee-little Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus was a man of short stature and when he heard that Jesus was going to be in town, he climbed a tree so he could see above the crowd and see Jesus. Jesus sees Zacchaeus' interest and zeal and invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. Zacchaeus then makes a formal invitation to dinner and happily welcomes Jesus into his home for dinner - even amid criticism which turns into repentance and redemption.

There is no chance at repentance and redemption unless an invitation is made and someone from the in-group welcomes the outsider in with open arms.

What might that look like for us at UMCG is that we keep an eye out for those we don't recognize and invite them to share a cup of coffee after worship? Maybe we invite folks out to brunch after church? Maybe we offer to hold the hymnal for the new family sitting next to us? Maybe we get over that awkward feeling of not knowing someone's name and simply say, “I'm sorry I can't





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remember your name, I'm Rob, what's your name?" and then let small talk flow. Ask someone if they have had a chance to meet me and escort them over to the meet the pastor table and share in conversation together. Or maybe we invite the family next door to *come with us* to the next fun thing Julie has planned? We welcome with open arms, not like the church of 8 people who would invite the young guest preacher and his fiancé to eat with them.

How welcoming is rooted in the gospel is that sin has made us outsiders to God, but Jesus invites us into right relationship to God. Jesus doesn't just invite but welcomes us with open arms to bring us arm and arm to our Maker. In turn, we are called to do the same with each other to invite people in the Spirit of Jesus and walk arm and arm together into this community of faith and find repentance and redemption. That welcome can look a lot of different ways, but in all ways, we are called to welcome people just as Jesus welcomes us. The doors are open-wide. Let's walk through them together and make sure our welcome is both invitational and accompanying each other with open arms in the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.