

## **"Words of Welcome"**

Romans 15:5-11; Matthew 5:14-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 17, 2016 – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

In our passage today from Paul's letter to the church at Rome, one sentence particularly stands out for me. You'll find it as the 7th verse: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Welcome. That can be a cheap word that means nothing. It can be no more than an artificial sentiment woven into a mat at the front door. It can be a hollow expression with no more sincerity than inquiring of a stranger "How are you?" It can be said with a straight face to someone then utterly disregarded five minutes later. Or, it can be one of the most wonderful words imaginable.

I've heard stories from some of you about how genuinely and openly you were received into your spouse's family. When these new "parents" of yours told you that you were welcome, they really meant it.

The same feelings hold as well when one of your children get married and there is such hospitality and acceptance. Not only do your new in-laws open their home to you, but they accept you—fully and unconditionally—into the most intimate part of their lives. That's a wonderful example of welcome and inclusion. We all need to feel that we're part of a circle larger than ourselves.

As Paul intends these words, he is particularly thinking of the fellowship of the church. In a true congregation there is a sense of warmth and love. It's real, and can't be missed. Everyone has a place. Everyone is important.

I thought about this a few weeks ago as we took communion. Yet that morning it suddenly occurred to me that something was wrong, something so clearly missing. I couldn't believe that anything so obvious could have completely escaped my awareness for so long. It became most evident when I was saying the familiar of invitation to this sacred meal, "Come, for everything is now ready."

What had been missing at our table, on a regular basis, was some of us. You see, while most of the church family was communing our Church School teachers and our children were away in their lessons. We were at the table, but they elsewhere in our building. Only a part of the church could hear that word, "Come," and then be in a position to do so.

So with the concurrence of the Elders this past Wednesday, we will now begin to offer a "second" communion immediately after our service for all those not able to respond to the first invitation. We will gather for a brief, but important, time before the altar to again let Christ offer us his meal. Any of our children will also be able to participate because we welcome them as well.

An Elder will be with me each second communion to help in serving but also represent the whole church. Parents may once again share in our Savior's meal if they wish to do so now as a family together. We will begin this new practice with our monthly communion in September.

For the benefit of those new with us, I might explain that we celebrate open communion at Highlands. All in attendance are welcomed to share in this holy meal. The invitation we extend has nothing to affiliation. It is more direct: "Do you want to come?" If so, that's all that is needed.

Age is also no barrier where the workings of the Spirit are concerned. Someone might ask, "But do you think children are old enough to understand its meaning?" To that I would say that I believe they can understand that we all belong to Christ and, through the bread and juice, he receives us in love. Yes, I think children can understand that.

Children may not know how to express Christ's sacrament in intellectual terms, but they do know what it means to feel included. We don't deny them Christmas because they may not fully comprehend the meaning of the Incarnation. Why, then, should we deny them holy communion?

If we truly believe that Jesus welcomed and embraced the children in his midst, why should we now deny them a seat at his table? No, children may not be able to explain things with the sophistication of adults, but they do know what it is to belong, to feel welcome, and they know how much it hurts to be excluded.

You see, we're family here and coming together is what families do. And in this family, Christ is the head of us all. He makes us one. "Let the children come to me," said Jesus, "for such is the Kingdom of Heaven." These are words of welcome. Where God reigns, all are invited, and that should be our practice and our proclamation to the world. Especially at Christ's table we are together as equals, whether we be young or old, because we are each valued and loved.

Today our world is very fragmented. There is so much that pulls us away from each other. Our differences define us more than our common humanity links us. With all the debate over immigration in our world today I am particularly reminded of a young woman from over a hundred years ago.

Her name was Emma Lazarus and she lived in New York City. In 1881 a friend, active in a group called the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, invited Emma to join her one day. They were going to visit Ward's Island, just off shore. It was here that new arrivals to America first came. This was temporary housing for thousands of refugees.

In that year there had been a new outbreak of anti-Semitism in Russia. Whole towns were being destroyed. All Jews were in danger. Consequently, thousands who were able to get out made their way here. Most came with literally nothing, but at least they were free and safe.

Emma was shocked and profoundly moved by what she saw. She became part of this effort to welcome and educate them. Her real contribution, however, came as a writer. She

regularly contributed to newspapers and magazines, writing on behalf of these new immigrants and their needs. She also travelled and spoke about the pressing concern.

At this same time, France was about to present the United States with a huge statue for New York Harbor. The dedication committee invited Emma to contribute a poem for the ceremony, which was to be held in October of 1886. This she did, and it was read but then largely forgotten. Emma died shortly thereafter.

It wasn't until twenty years later that the poem was rediscovered. With thousands continuing to come to our shores, her depiction of Lady Liberty as the "Mother of Exiles" struck a positive note in people's minds. The last few sentences of her poem were then inscribed on a plaque and attached to the pedestal. Now those lines are inseparable from the statue itself. Emma Lazarus wrote:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shores. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

In an even greater way that's the role of the Church, for it welcomes all. The Church, on behalf of Christ, provides a place of refuge and encouragement and understanding. It's where God's will is revealed and Christ's promises are remembered. It doesn't ask an individual to bring recommendations for admittance, but accepts persons, in Jesus' name, just as they come.

And once here, the Church continues to embrace all even when they may have differing ideas or opinions. The Church, when it acts as Christ, doesn't pass judgment on what people wear nor the hair style they choose. These are superficial things. Race and gender and age present no barriers. Instead it takes all these natural differences and unique gifts, and joins them together for greater good. That's what the Church is about, or should be.

These words of Paul come back to us once again: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." That's a tall order, but a possible one. To make it happen, though, we have to put genuine enthusiasm into our welcome. We have to make it come alive. It has to be real and sincere, and has to continue long after someone first walks in the door.

Importantly, it depends on each one of us. Ninety-nine people can receive new members, but it takes only one to push them back out again.

So when you greet people here, greet them in Christ's name. Take them as they are, even as you wish to be received. Remember that this really isn't our church, but it's his. Still the invitation must come from us. The hand of fellowship is attached to our arm.

Jesus depends on you and me to grow his Kingdom. Surely we won't let him down. We won't forget to extend words of welcome. And do so sincerely to all.