

Sermon 03-01-2026  
How to be welcoming when it's hard – Rev. Markus Wegenast  
Romans 15:7-13

<sup>7</sup> Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors <sup>9</sup> and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,  
 “Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles  
 and sing praises to your name”;  
<sup>10</sup> and again he says,  
 “Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people”;  
<sup>11</sup> and again,  
 “Praise the Lord, all you gentiles,  
 and let all the peoples praise him”;  
<sup>12</sup> and again Isaiah says,  
 “The root of Jesse shall come,  
 the one who rises to rule the gentiles;  
 in him the gentiles shall hope.”  
<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1)

“Don’t encourage him – he’s not good for us!” These were the words of a church member about a new visitor to a church that I served several years ago. The man in question, let’s just call him Chuck, was known in our community to be a trouble maker – he frequently went to public events and would bring up provocative issues and ideologies. When he started attending our church, he would also often make comments that made others cringe.

“Don’t encourage him – he’s not good for us!” I could understand why the member of my church would say that to me – she had the interest of the church in mind and didn’t want others to get discouraged by Chuck’s comments.

How do you deal with a situation like that as a church family? As a church we want to be welcoming but we also want our church to be a welcoming environment for others – does that set limits?

Today we are talking about our value statement number 2:

**Church of the Saviour welcomes all people.**

It’s a pretty clear statement, it doesn’t need much interpretation. But as with all things, it can get complicated when you poke at it from different angles. So, let’s poke a little, shall we?

Being welcoming is not a theory – it’s not a philosophical stance that only needs to be thought through. Being welcoming is a practice, it’s an action that should not get stuck in theory.

2)

In order to act on it, however, I do feel it is right to gain an understanding of why we *should* be welcoming.

Today’s Bible text from Romans gives us a beautiful and clear understanding of why it is so important for a church to be welcoming:

**Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. – Romans 15:7**

Being welcoming is a mandate – it’s not a fancy choice that a congregation has invented. And it is more than a mandate, it is also a practice that has been practiced by God himself in Jesus Christ.

To really understand this we need to go back for a moment:

Last Sunday we looked at our first value statement together. Do you remember it? “Centering on Christ.” We learned about the long biblical story arch that started with God entering into a pretty exclusive relationship with Abraham leading all the way to Jesus. That’s when Christ became the center and foundation of the church and through this foundation God was extending his relationship offer to all people.

Our second value statement is a beautiful follow up. Take a look: How many times do you count the word “gentiles” in today’s reading? 6 times we heard that word in today’s reading. It’s one of those words we only find in the Bible today.

Gentiles literally translated means “peoples” or “nations” and that is exactly the point of God in Christ. Through Jesus God became a God of all people, not just of Israel, but of all. Well, let’s sharpen that statement a bit: God was always the God of all people, but in Jesus he is re-deepening his relationship and love to all.

That’s the background for our second value statement and we can say the following:

**If God has modeled to welcome all people into a relationship, then we ought to do that as well.**

Do you see how our second value statement is really connected to our first one? Without Christ becoming our center we would never have experienced God’s welcoming love in the first place.

I admitted to you last Sunday that I do not understand why God went the route of Abraham and Israel (...) (*evtl mention class*).

The good news is we do not have to understand why God did it the way he did it, the only thing we need to understand is that because God did it, we should do it too!

Imagine, just for a moment, if God and the early church would have had the attitude that that church member at a former church of mine? I'm not saying this to criticize her but make a point. Imagine if the early church and God himself would have said:

“Don't encourage those gentiles – they're not good for us!” What if the church would have remained a Jewish enterprise, just focusing on converting OT believers to accept Jesus as the Messiah? Well, then you and I would not be here today and the good news of God in Jesus Christ would never have been shared in the world! It would forever be limited to the preaching of Rabbi's in synagogues. The Good News would be an exclusive news about how God reconciled Israel – not the world!

But that's not how the story goes. There were debates about it, we can read about these debates in the NT, and the outcome of these debates were rock solid:

**In Christ, God extended his welcoming love to all nations and to all people at all places in all times.**

God desires for us to embrace this wholeheartedly and copy his welcoming spirit.

Are we? Are you? Let's get practical and see what we can do to do it like God and welcome all people.

3)

As we do this I invite you to be brave and not make it too easy on yourself to dig into the practical aspects of exploring our second value statement.

You probably agree: is not a unique value statement for a church to say we welcome all people. Every church wants to be friendly, every church wants to be called a welcoming church. It's one of the biggest disappointments for a church family to hear a negative visitor feedback that says they didn't feel welcomed.

Everyone wants to be welcoming, but here's the thing: It's easy to welcome nice people - people that are like us - people that share common interests & values.

Our value statement says welcome all people and that includes people that we may not like – maybe people like Chuck that come with a bit of a destructive element in their soul. All of the sudden welcoming all gets really challenging.

I came across a powerful definition of what it means to be welcoming the other day that I want to share with you:

**To be welcoming means to wholeheartedly accept someone.**

How do you do that when that someone is not quite that acceptable?!

Short answer: You do it like Christ! Christ accepted what was unacceptable, he welcomed the sinner! Sin is not acceptable to God because sin is open or hidden rebellion against God.

I know this sounds harsh, but without this harshness we miss out on the depth of God's welcoming love. God loved us while we were yet sinner, (Romans 5:8) we can't over emphasize how spectacular that is.

It is completely counter cultural – in our culture we typically wait until someone is a friend before we extend our full warmth and love. God did it the other way around. He first loved us and then invites us to become friends!

That's why we need to learn a very difficult and important lesson when it comes to being welcoming: Yes, to be welcoming means to wholeheartedly accept someone.

**And...**

**It doesn't mean you have to agree or affirm everything a person thinks, says or does!**

That's how it worked out for us to welcome Chuck in that previous church. We could not agree, affirm and celebrate his destructive behaviors. At times as a pastor I even had to make sure that he didn't spoil it for others, and I had to put restrictions on him – but that does not change the fact that we tried to wholeheartedly accept him – even though sometimes the heart cringed!

Jesus modeled more perfectly how to welcome someone without agreeing with everything they do or say. Just think of encounters like Jesus and Zacchaeus or the woman at the well. He did not affirm Zacchaeus exploiting behaviors and he did not affirm the woman's sexual liberties – but that did not keep him from being welcoming to them and having a meaningful relationship with them.

We feel that's a contradiction – our culture tells us that to be welcoming means to agree and affirm a persons thoughts, words and behaviors – that's not what Jesus demonstrated to us in the power of his welcoming love.

Our culture (today and then) tells us that Jesus needs to affirm the woman's life choices in order to be truly welcoming of her; our culture (today and then) tells us that Jesus should not have associated with Zacchaeus because he was a bad guy. But Jesus shows us that loving and welcoming someone does not mean you have to agree with them and leave them unchallenged.

Don't fall into the cultural trap that suggests we can only welcome those we like. Don't fall into the cultural trap that suggests that if you welcome someone it means you agree with them on all they do and believe.

...

It is very possible that you do not like hearing what I'm saying right now. Your definition of being welcoming may be different. You may feel that you have to affirm someone's full set of behaviors, orientations, choices and stances in order to be truly welcoming.

It's ok if you disagree with me on that, but please hear me in this point:

**Don't limit your love to people you like and agree with.**

Do it like God, expand your love to all people, including the ones that are not likeable to you.

It's the only way to overcome the current rise of polarization in our country. And it's the only way to imitate what God did in Jesus Christ for us. God does not affirm all the things we do and think and still God loves us and welcomes us to be part of his family.

That's what's so amazing about God's grace, that's why being a follower of Jesus is so very rewarding... It exposes us to people we would never deem worthy of our energy, time and love.

Sure, there may be dangers and inconveniences attached with that. Think of Judas. Jesus loved and welcomed him and ended up being betrayed by him. Yet Jesus called him a friend - still in the very moment of betrayal.

Don't limit your love to only people you like. And here is another practical tip:

**Decide in your heart to welcome people before you even meet them!**

This may seem hard to pull off but it is exactly what God modeled to us in Jesus Christ when the Bible tells us that he loved us before we had a chance to love him (Romans 5:8 and Ephesians 1:4).

*Evtl. Share about Navis family...*

I have one more practical piece of advice – are you good for that? This is more in terms of you being a member at COS.

Have you heard the following statement before:

**People don't long for a friendly church, people long for a church ready to make friends**

This may be a tad uncomfortable to hear – you may not like the idea of adding dozens of new friends to your life. It's the sentiment that counts here. I did not

consider Chuck a friend of mine, but I wanted to treat him like a friend. And see, friends are able to tell each other the truth and don't need to agree on everything.

Friends can even argue with one another and question each other's choices – that is a mark of friendship. God has shown us this kind of friendship when he accepted us and loved us before we even loved him.

What a powerful principle we are invited to display in our lives.

*Repeat all three tips...*

Let's close with a story that drives all of this home...

4)

#### The hippie and the old deacon

There was a young, intelligent university student named Bill. Bill was what some people call a "free spirit" or "hippie." He had long wild hair, always wore the same old and torn T-shirt, jeans and no shoes.

Across the street from the university campus was a conservative church. The people there were rich, older and well-dressed. They wanted to help the university students nearby, but they did not know exactly how to do it.

Well, one day Bill decided to go visit this church by his university. As usual, he went wearing his only jeans, old, torn T-shirt and his dirty long hair. The church service had already started and was full, so Bill walked down the center aisle looking for a seat.

People were getting more and more uncomfortable as they watched this unclean, wild-looking young man.

Finally, Bill got to the front and saw there were no more empty seats, so he just sat down on the floor right in front of the preacher. No one had ever done that in this church before! By now, everyone was upset and distracted.

Then, a respected old church deacon got up and started toward the front. Everyone was thinking: "You can't blame the deacon, he really should correct this disrespectful young man." Everyone was watching.

Even the preacher stopped his sermon when the old man finally got to the front. Then, they were all completely surprised to see the old deacon drop his walking stick and very slowly sit down on the floor next to this young hippie. He did not want this young man to sit alone and feel unaccepted. The people in the church were moved to tears. Finally, the preacher said: "What I am preaching about today you will probably never remember. But what you have just seen you will never forget!"

Did the deacon have to become a hippie to make Bill feel welcome? No!

Did the deacon have to take his shoes and suit off to welcome Bill? No!

Did the deacon have to celebrate Bill's choices of cloth and life? No!

Where do you see welcoming love at display in your life? Are you hungry for being welcoming like the usher in the story? Or are you maybe more like Chuck and need to learn that people may not agree with you and oppose you but are ready to welcome you into the transforming love of God.

May we go forth, filled with God's love and to it like him: welcome all – even when it's hard – for the transformation of the world. Amen.