

**“Welcome One Another”**  
**Sermon Series on *The Church That Jesus Longs For* #2**  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**January 10, 2016**  
**(Mt. 5:43-48)**

**Introduction.**

In his book *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser writes, “The power we have to embrace or to reject people is almost unlimited.”<sup>1</sup> All of us know how thrilling it is to see someone we love after a long absence. Our faces light up at the sight of them, we grin from ear to ear, and the warm embrace of a hug feels so good. But we also know how painful it is when someone rejects us or we’re made to feel unwelcome.

“Welcome” is a word of grace. It says, “Come here. Join me. Please be seated. When can we get together?” It comes from two Middle English words used in the 12<sup>th</sup> century which meant “desired” and “guest,” so it came to mean “willed comer”. It is a word of invitation, a word of hospitality.

The Barnes' welcomed the newest members of our family into the world last fall. Campbell Everly Barnes was born in September, and Millie Michelle Barnes was born on October. We got to see all of our grandchildren after Christmas, and it was a treat to hold these little girls in my arms. What a thrill it was to welcome these new little ones into the world and into our family.

When we welcome a new baby into the family, we make room for them in our home and we make time for them in our schedule. They have a way of displacing everything, don't they? As new parents, our grown children are experiencing this in a big way. When they took our granddaughters home from the hospital, these baby girls changed everything in their lives. The parents will never be the same again.

One of the things we want to do at First Pres is to create a greater culture of invitation, hospitality, and welcome, and the Bible tells us how we can do it. Let's take a closer look.

**I. The Mutuality Command to Welcome.**

The apostle Paul expressed the significance of the mutuality command to “welcome one another” in his letter to the church in Rome when he wrote in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, “*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God*” (Rm. 15:7). Even though Paul had never met the people in the church in Rome, he knew something about their congregation. And the letter to the followers of Jesus there was intended not only to make an introduction, but also to teach them the truths of the gospel and encourage them in the way of Christ.

“Greet” is another word Paul used in his letter to express this sense of welcome, and at least 15 times in the last chapter of his letter to the Romans the apostle sent greetings to someone in particular in the congregation. The term “greet” conveys a sense of warm acceptance and genuine interest, and it goes beyond a superficial “hello.” It conveys the idea of recognition and warm friendship.

Some people have a way of coming into a room, and when they do they communicate by everything they say and do, “Here I am!” They try to be the center of attention. They want the spotlight to be directed at them. Then there are other people who, when they enter a room, their whole manner of life says, “There you are!” Do you see the difference? The follower of Jesus

Christ should be a person who is more interested in saying, “There you are!” than they are, “Here I am!”

Jesus had a way of making each person He met feel that they were important to Him. Philip Yancey has written<sup>2</sup> that Jesus honored the dignity of every person, and He became known as a friend of sinners. Even though He denounced the religious system of His day, Jesus treated a member of the Sanhedrin like Nicodemus with respect. And although he spoke against the dangers of wealth, He showed love and compassion toward a rich young ruler. Even a racially-mixed woman with five husbands, and a thief dying on a cross were welcome to join Him in His kingdom. The person was always more important to Jesus than the category they represented. How can you and I be more like that?

I’ve discovered there’s a difference between being friendly and being hospitable. Friendliness is extending a hand of greeting and making a person feel accepted. However, hospitality involves more than that. It’s making room and the table and time on the schedule to invite a person into your life. It requires more of us, and it’s not always convenient. There are many churches that are friendly, but they’re not very hospitable.

When Lorie visited Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary to check it out as she was making application to grad schools, she had an amazing experience of hospitality and welcome. It helped her decide that Gordon-Conwell was the place she wanted to study. She and her parents arrived on campus, and they met Dr. Lloyd Calhan, the vice president of the school. Even though they didn’t have an appointment, he dropped what he was doing, and he gave them his full attention for an hour-and-a-half.

Now, that may not sound very remarkable to you, but what Dr. Calhan was doing that day when Lorie and her parents arrived was working with the Secret Service detail which had been assigned to protect our own Mike Ford, who was the son of then President Gerald Ford, while the president was in office. Mike was going to be a student at the seminary that fall. Dr. Calhan was helping the secret service detail take care of all the arrangements before Mike and Gayle arrived to make sure the campus was safe.

Lorie and her parents were so impressed that Dr. Calhan made them feel like they were just as important as the son of the President of the United States. And they concluded that Gordon-Conwell was where Lorie wanted to study because of such remarkable hospitality. Little did Lorie know that Mike and Gayle would become dear friends here at First Pres years later when we moved to Winston-Salem!

How can we create a greater culture of invitation and hospitality a tour church? What would it take to make room in our busy lives for new people? How can we do a better job of welcoming the new comer in our midst? Are you willing to drop your plans to welcome someone today?

## **II. Welcoming a Stranger.**

In Matthew 5 Jesus said, “*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the pagans do that?*” (5:46-47).

Jesus acknowledged that everyone tends to be friendly by nature, but usually we’re only friendly to people who are like us. We’re nice to people who are nice in return. We like our friends, and our friends like us. It doesn’t require a whole lot of faith, and it doesn’t demand very much of a person to live by the law of *relational reciprocity*.

But what about greeting someone who isn't in my natural circle of friends? What do I do then? What about the stranger I meet, the odd person I encounter, and even the enemy I may have. Jesus called His disciples to treat everyone as if they really mattered and counted for something, because in the eyes of God they do. This includes the people who aren't like us, the people who are hard to love, and even the person we perceive to be an enemy. Every person is made in the image of God, and every one of them is loved by the Lord. Jesus died for their sins just like He died for mine, and even the people who are hard for me to love are precious in God's sight.

Believers should be generous in their welcome, and we shouldn't allow differences to tempt us to show favoritism. A person's color, personality, gender, social status, economic standing, political conviction, or even religious belief is no excuse to fail to be as welcoming as we can possibly be. Sinner and saint, the haves and the have-nots, you and I and everyone else are all welcome in the kingdom of God.

Do you remember the television show "Cheers" that was a hit during the 1980s? I'm convinced that one of the reasons that show was so popular is because of the theme song. People are attracted to the notion of having a place you can go where everybody knows your name. The TV show "Friends" did the same thing in the 90s. The sad reality is that very few people really have that kind of place in their lives. We're a nation of strangers, and loneliness is one of the biggest problems in society today.

It's a tragic fact that most churches don't do a very good job of being very welcoming and friendly to the stranger. The place which should be the most hospitable is often times cold and unreceptive. I read about a man a few years ago who visited 18 different churches on successive Sundays. He was trying to find out what the churches were really like.

He wrote, "I sat near the front. After the service, I walked slowly to the rear, and then returned to the front and then back to the foyer again using another aisle. I smiled, I dressed neatly. I asked one person to direct me to a specific place, like a fellowship hall, or the pastor's study, etc. And I remained for coffee if it was served. I used a scale to rate the reception I received, and I awarded points on the following basis:

- 10 for a smile from a worshipper;
- 10 for a greeting from someone sitting nearby;
- 100 for an exchange of names;
- 200 for an invitation to have coffee;
- 200 for an invitation to return;
- 1000 for an introduction to another worshipper; and
- 2000 for an invitation to meet the pastor."

Here is what he found. On this scale, 11 of the 18 churches earned fewer than 100 points, and 5 actually received less than 20!

The doctrine of a church may be biblical, the singing of the choir or the worship team may be inspirational, the preaching of the sermon may be theologically sound and uplifting, but when a visitor finds no one who cares whether or not he or she is there, that visitor is not likely to come back again.<sup>3</sup>

Karen Schoulda is the best example I've ever seen in a church of a person who is welcoming and hospitable. Every Sunday she leads a team of greeters and ushers in our congregation, and she exudes the love of Christ in welcoming people to our church. Her smile is contagious, and I love being around her. In addition, Karen has a passion for following up on visitors and tracking down lost sheep. Every once in a while she sends me a note asking me to follow up on some.

She also dreams up new ways to make people feel at home and comfortable here. The Neighborhood Cookout we hosted last fall, and our outreach event of Journey to Christmas back in December were both her brilliant ideas. We all need to follow Karen's godly example. May her tribe increase!

The leadership of our church wants to create a greater culture of invitation and welcome at First Pres. It's a part of our 20/20 Plan. We want to be outwardly focused and inwardly strong. And we want to give our attention not only those who are already a part of our church fellowship, but especially to those who aren't coming here yet, those who don't already know Jesus. We want to invite all people to say "yes!" to Jesus with their whole lives.

### **III. The Welcome of God.**

What is the motivation for loving others and welcoming them with the name of Christ? The motivation behind it all is the welcome we've experienced from God Himself and the unconditional love He has shown to each of us in Christ. One of the amazing truths of the gospel is that God loves us with an everlasting love, and no matter what we've done and no matter how far we have wandered, God is always there to welcome us home.

The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the best known parables of Jesus. You'll recall it tells the story of a father and his two sons. One of the boys demanded his share of the family inheritance, and he left home and blew all his money in wild living in what was referred to as "the far country." When he came to his senses, he decided to go home and throw himself at his father's mercy hoping his dad would give him a job as a hired hand so he could just get by and feed himself. The young man returned to his father a broken and humbled person.

When he neared home, as he was rehearsing in his mind the speech he would say to his father, much to his surprise, his dad ran out to meet him. This was something no self-respecting father would ever do in the ancient near east. His dad threw his arms around the young man, and welcomed his boy home. He ordered his servants to kill the fatted calf and prepare for a homecoming party. His son was lost, but now he was found.

Why is it that we love that story so much? Why does it speak to our hearts at such a deep level? It's because to one extent or another we've all been prodigals at some time in our lives. We've all wandered away, shaken an angry fist at God, and squandered our family inheritance in the far country. We've all left "home" hoping to find something more exciting, more fulfilling, more whatever, only to discover that life in the far country wears you down, leaves you broke, and uses you up. Eventually you run out of toys, awards, money, jobs, health, and relationships, and you feel completely spent. It's amazing what a person will do in the far country. People do things there they would never do at home.

The late Henri Nouwen once wrote, "God rejoices [when the prodigal son comes home] not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God [simply] rejoices because *one* of his children who was lost has been found."<sup>4</sup>

If you ask people what they must do to go to heaven, most of them will tell you, "Be a good person." However, Jesus' contradicted that idea altogether. He says that all we have to do to go to heaven is cry, "Help!" The waiting Father *welcomes* home anyone who has wandered, and while the prodigal son does indeed come to his senses and makes a decision to return home, it's really the Father who makes the first move. That's because we have a God of welcome which should be a model to every single one of us.

### **Conclusion.**

There was a woman who invited some people over for dinner one night, and when they all sat down at the table for the meal, she turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, "Honey, would you please say the blessing?" The little girl replied, "Oh, Mommy, I don't know what to say." So the mother said, "That's okay, honey. Just say what you hear Mommy say." And at that the little girl bowed her head and said, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

All of us struggle to be welcoming and extend hospitality from time to time, and this is as true in the church of Jesus Christ as anywhere else. When we come here on Sunday mornings, we see our friends, and we want to catch up with one another and find out how those we already know and love are doing. We gravitate to the people with whom we are familiar, and we shy away from those we don't know. This is very natural, but it's not very biblical.

So I want you to do an experiment with me today after the worship service. At the conclusion of the service after I say the benediction, you can't talk to anyone you already know for at least 5 minutes. For the first 5 minutes after the service is over, you have to seek out someone you don't already know and talk to them. And then you can talk to your friends. This is a first step in becoming a more welcoming congregation. Let's see how you do with this assignment.

May you and I follow the example of Christ, and may we welcome those around us, both here and wherever we may go in the name of Jesus. Make room at your table and time in your schedule, and extend a welcome in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 244-255.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from *Parables, Etc.*, October 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, p. 114.