

Our welcome and inclusion in a faith community like this one is not because we have fulfilled enough requirements – of God’s law or any others we may have devised. It has come through Jesus fulfilling all requirements on our behalf. Our righteousness does surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law because it is the righteousness that has been gifted to us through Jesus.

And the same is true of everyone. We don’t extend a welcome to people once they have jumped through any hoops we have created. We extend the welcome that has been extended to us.

And that means the way we welcome is not confined to what we do within these four walls. If it is then we will never get anywhere close to understanding what it means to be a welcoming community. Welcoming is not a duty you roster someone on to perform, it is an attribute of God that we seek to explore.

That is what Jesus did with all God’s law. We don’t simply try and stay within the confines of God’s law; meeting what we think are its minimal requirements. Instead, we are released to discover the fullness of it as we enact it in our lives.

I know I should not murder others and I know how to keep within the restraints of that law. But why should I let that restrain me from seeking to remove ill thoughts against others. Why should I let it restrain me from seeking to pro-

mote the quality of life of the people I might ordinarily keep my distance from?

The same is true when it comes to welcoming others. All people are in need of the unconditional welcome and inclusion that only Jesus can bring – the welcome we have received.

My hope and prayer is that all the congregations and people of our LCA will seek to extend that welcome to others. I fully expect that this will extend us and push us beyond the four walls of our churches and beyond the boundaries we normally operate in. But as that happens I reckon we will find Jesus already there.

He went beyond the boundaries in the past, to include all people in God’s kingdom. He now calls each of us to explore with him the full extent and intent of his law, knowing we will discover there are simply no limits to his grace, as we extend his welcome to all the people we encounter in our lives. Amen.

Matthew 5:21-37 By Pastor Stephen Schultz

Would you consider yourself to be a welcoming congregation? A simple yes or no will suffice. I guess it depends on your definition of ‘welcoming’. I reckon most Lutheran congregations think they are welcoming. In the last two years I have been fortunate to have worshipped in more than 70 of our congregations, so I have formed my own impression of how welcoming we are.

This is not an easy conversation for congregations to have – but I believe it is one of the most important conversations we need to have. It is not easy to initiate such a conversation from within – which is why you invite the Assistant Bishop for Mission to preach

I understand why we might think we are welcoming. The national church life survey was conducted a few years ago and more than 11,000 Lutherans filled it out. You completed the survey here and 115 members from your community completed it.

This survey gives us some insights about a range of things in our congregations – including how welcoming and inclusive we are.

92% of people in this congregation said they had a strong sense of belonging, 84% said they found it easy to make friends here and your highest listed gift is hospitality. That all sounds like a wel-

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coming enough place, doesn’t it! And these are the similar numbers across all our Lutheran congregations. But...

But, the vast majority of our congregations are made up of long term members who have had plenty of time to feel like they belong, plenty of time to make friends, plenty of time to enjoy each other’s hospitality. Only 3 % of people in our congregations have come from outside the church in the last five years.

When Lutherans were asked to list the top three things we valued about our congregation 62% said Holy Communion, 38% said preaching and 31% said traditional worship. The second lowest response, with only 8% of people listing it as a top three value, was *‘reaching those who don’t attend church’*.

Only 31% of us had invited a non-churched person to church in the last 12 months. Only 14% of us feel comfortable talking about our faith and look for an opportunity to do so. And when, despite all this, new people do end up coming through our doors only 17% of us will always seek out and welcome them.

I ask again, would we consider yourself to be a welcoming congregation? I reckon we are sending some mixed messages in our church. We are very welcoming of those who already belong. But if

you happen to be outside of our church communities, then they can be hard nuts to crack; hard circles to break into.

I told you this is not an easy conversation to have. I'm not singling you out. This has been my experience these last couple of years as I've travelled around our church. I've struggled to feel welcome and included in many of our congregations – and I'm a lifelong member of the church, I'm a pastor in the church, I'm more often than not the guest preacher in the church and I'm a Schultz!

I am really struggling to work it out because it is not as though we are not nice people – we are lovely people (mostly). So why is it that we struggle to welcome the stranger and love the stranger – which is actually the true definition of hospitality?

I wonder if it boils down to our understanding of God. Is God welcoming? What a silly question to ask! Of course he is, isn't he?

For God so loved the world! Yes, but I wonder if we are getting some mixed messages from God. Take the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy; a text that spoke of life and prosperity and blessing for God's people as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. A great reading to celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving.

But it was conditional. That is what

would happen if they were careful to obey his commands, decrees and laws. If they didn't then they would get the opposite of these things: destruction and death and curses. So yes, we have a welcoming, generous God – as long as we abide by his rules. If not, then prepare to have the welcome mat pulled from under your feet!

That can be the impression some people have of the church. If you abide by the rules and expectations – if you fit in with us – then you are most welcome. But if you don't...then you aren't. We won't necessarily say that...but you'll know it. You'll feel it.

But Jesus changed all that, didn't he? Jesus was the eternal Word of God who became flesh to dwell among us and to ensure there were no more mixed messages. He demonstrated the inclusive and welcoming nature of God in the way he treated those both within and outside of the accepted religious circles.

When Jesus said: *'I am the way and the truth and the life, no one can come to the Father except through me'*, he was laying out God's welcome mat to all and sundry. And he went to great lengths to show who exactly was included in this welcome.

So he ate with tax collectors and sinners, he touched lepers, he healed a Roman centurion's servant and a Syrophenician woman's daughter and he said, *'let*

the children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'.

The religious leaders weren't happy! They had set the bar high in order to honour God's holiness – but it had made it so hard for people to feel like they truly belonged; like they were really welcome. When they saw all that Jesus was doing, the boundaries he was crossing, they thought he was lowering the bar. But not so

Jesus said: *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them'*. And he was actually raising the bar, for he also said: *'unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven'*.

He then went on to talk about God's rules, laws and commands in a very radical and provocative way. Five times Jesus said: *'You have heard that it was said...'* He then detailed a particular law that was in place and how it was generally understood.

And five times Jesus then said: *'But I tell you...'* He then gave details about how the law should be interpreted.

He didn't water down God's law – he took it to its full extent. God's law does matter. It matters because it serves to protect and promote our quality of life.

God hasn't changed his mind about what is good for us and Jesus wasn't about to minimise that.

But if you are going to use God's law to form the basis of who is welcome and who is not or to work out who deserves inclusion and who does not, then you will get no support from Jesus.

In his interpretation Jesus blows away all the boundaries that exist. *'You have heard that it was said...'* *'But I tell you...'*

It has been said that you should not murder. Under the old interpretation it was clear enough and achievable enough. You could get to the end of the day and ask yourself, 'have I murdered anyone today?' 'No'? Excellent. Target achieved.

But Jesus does not want us to be content with staying within the limit of a particular law. He wants the fullness of God's law to be realised. So he says: *'I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment'*.

Suddenly it is not so easy to mark any law as 'target achieved'. And this is not a matter of making God's law even harder to achieve. The level of our obedience to God's law cannot get us into God's kingdom. Our own righteousness can never reach the required level of perfection. The bar is simply too high.