

W is for Welcome – Discussion Notes

Part 1 – *Room at the Table*



- Over the next three weeks we'll investigate the themes of invitation, welcome, and hospitality with special focus on the life and challenges ahead of our church, right now.
- Today we'll consider some Scriptural evidence of a God who welcomes, and expects his followers to do the same.

Belonging – More than Sentiment

- You might find, the more you investigate the stories we tend to celebrate, that the theme of belonging is at the very core of each.
- Many have noticed that this theme of belonging, family, acceptance elicits such response from us not simply because it pulls at our heart-strings, but because it's awakening something deeply human. It's tapping into something undeniably true about us. It's more than sentiment.
- So when we discover that there's room at the table for us (whatever table that might be) we gravitate to it because of a deeply embedded need for belonging.

Last Supper & Foot Washing

- At the end of Jesus' life he spends his last hours of freedom with his friends, they have a meal together.
- This story, and the actions of the next couple of days paralleled for Jesus, so he uses the meal to explain it. The disciples, as per usual, are a little slow on the uptake.
- So this meal had great significance. But it was also just a meal. And a meal meant (for them) friendship, trust, togetherness, and belonging.
- Something happens at the meal, which got more than a little awkward. Jesus had a way of making meals awkward.
- At one point Jesus takes off some of his clothing, and prepares to work. He begins to wash his friend's feet.
- It's hard to overstate how uncomfortable and disturbing this would have been for the disciples. It was bizarre culturally, it was shocking, and even offensive to some like Peter.
- A slave should have been by the door, and when there wasn't one, Jesus seizes the opportunity to sear into the minds of his disciples the nature and heart of God toward humanity.

- Jesus is the perfect host, the most welcoming patron. No act of welcome or love is below him. He is about to prove this on the cross in service to the Father and his love for the world, and he proves it in the moment, around the table with his friends.
- When it comes to love, and care, and welcome, Jesus means business.
- Jesus is like this because God's like this, he has been from the very beginning,

I Love What You've Done with the Place

- We discover as we open to the first page of the Bible that it's God's nature to love and welcome. It's in God's nature to cultivate habitable space for humankind. Not simply in the abstract, or philosophically, but literally.
- The first couple of characteristics we learn about God in Genesis is that a) he's a creator/an architect/ an artist (*In the beginning God created...*) and b) he's a host.
- He creates the universe, and to our knowledge at this point in time at least in this solar system, just one inhabitable planet.
- One of the first things we learn is he is a host, he's created an environment for us to thrive in. It's his nature.
- In case you want to skip to the end, it's one of the last things we learn about him, too.

A Moveable Feast

- Through the story of God and humanity we learn that God continues to take care of people. He provides and promises future care for Abraham, and his children.
- When Israel cries out from Egypt, God rescues and brings nation-wide emancipation...and he takes them on the road. He provides for them in various fashions, a moveable feast.
- Though Israel continually abandons the life-line of trusting God, he sticks with them. They learn hard lessons, but he's always there for them, always providing for them.

Be Like Me

- God gives Israel a taste of his character through the giving of the Law, and within it specific mention concerning how they are to welcome and treat outsiders. Leviticus 19. 33-34 *"Do not take advantage of foreigners who live among you in your land. 34 Treat them like native-born Israelites, and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.*

- Throughout the Scripture we see God's nature continually revealed as welcoming and hospitable. This is his overarching posture of God.
- David, who spends much of his time on earth on the run for his life, understands God to be a person of comfort and safety. *"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."* (Psalm 23) (and Psalm 61)
- Solomon, David's son, sees God similarly. He writes in the Proverbs, *"The name of the Lord is a strong tower that the righteous run into and are safe."* (Proverbs 18. 10).
- Again, again and again, God's seen this way...there's always room at the table.

Jesus vs Martha Stewart

- Being the fullest and best expression of God and his nature, Jesus enters the scene.
- He doesn't buy a big house, or personally throw lots of dinner parties (unless you count the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000), but he certainly attends a lot of dinner parties.
- And, he doesn't seem to mind who he eats with. One day he's eating with wealthy types, and next he's eating with nasty, mean, hated people. He's out and about so much that some accuse him of being a bit of a partyer.
- But you'll notice that when Jesus comes to dinner, he usually has good reason. Not simply to welcome the likes of Zacchaeus and his friends into the Kingdom of God, but to make a point every now and then.
- In Luke 14 Jesus get's invited over to a rich religious persons house for dinner. One writer describes it as *"one of the most awkward dinner parties of all time"*, because Jesus keeps picking fights and pointing out how the dinner party wasn't a very good dinner part at all, according to him.
- Another writer says this about the passage we've just read, *"Jesus' understanding of who are the downtrodden has been expanded well beyond the Old Testament understanding, to include not just the victims of social structures and practices – widows, orphans, aliens, the poor, imprisoned – but also those excluded from full participation in society because they are defective, malformed, or seen as religiously inferior. The coming of God's just reign requires that these too be lifted up."* (Nicholas Wolterstorff) (must be welcomed)
- Jesus enjoys the company of all kinds. His disciples were questionable from the start, lots of unlikely choices there, he's the first to make any kind of historical stand when it comes to women's or civil rights, he surrounds himself with scoundrels, the poor and sick, and seeks out the lonely, isolated, ostracized people in society. He's always ready to respond to them.

- His last conversation before he died was with another dying man, a thief, wherein he says, *“Forget about all your past mistakes, today I’m ushering you past the bouncer and right into the VIP room.”*
- In fact, the only people who’s company Jesus doesn’t seem to enjoy are the exclusive, elite, clicky bunch perched on top of the religious, cultural and social food chain.
- After he rises from the dead, he continues to welcome and invite. He cooks literal breakfast on the beach. Even though his friends had abandoned him, lost faith in the cause and gone back to their old fishing job, there’s Jesus, around a fire, with some fish and bread. He restores Peter, and serves his friends with something as comforting and as simple as a meal after a long night of fruitless fishing. Chief Jesus.
- You can’t read about Jesus and miss that fact that he welcomed people, all kinds of people, in all kinds of places, at any time of the day, or week, or hour. Even his last.
- His first followers get that.

Mission Accomplished (sort of).

- God has welcomed humanity. God has pursued and invited humanity. From creation to foot washing, to the most generous action of all time (the cross), God’s character has benefited us again, again and again. Spiritually, practically, any way you work it. And many of us have accepted and gained.
- It never entered the minds of Jesus’ first followers that the grace and life they’d encountered was meant to stop with them. They understood (and it shows in how they conducted themselves) that there was more room at the table, and Jesus’ expected them to help him fill it.
- The hospitable and invitational nature of the first Christian communities was a force to be reckoned with. Despite persecution, the unrelenting truth about God’s character permeated their entire lives.
- So they spoke honestly, and boldly about Jesus and what he’d accomplished. But they also showed it. Jesus didn’t just talk about God’s love and invitation for relationship to mankind, he showed it. So did they.
- They served each other. They took care of and looked out for each other. And they served and took care of outsiders in need, too. Christianity was immensely popular amongst the poor and marginalized from the first-third centuries. Christian communities, churches, were the only places where a rich man and slave girl would be treated with the same measure of care and respect...because Jesus said so.

- This way of living revolutionized things. As one remarked at the time, these people turned the world upside down. This meant that orphanages, hospitals, international aid, and incredibly influential and progressive educational systems all stemmed back to a small band of misfits, welcomed by an estranged Rabbi to eat at his table where he washed their feet.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a little book called *“Life Together”* while living in a sort of underground seminary commune in Nazi Germany. He writes, *“The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. It is our daily bread that we eat, not my own. We share our bread. Thus we are family bound to one another not only in the Spirit but in our whole physical being. The one bread that is given to our fellowship links us together in a firm covenant. Now none dares go hungry as long as another has bread, and he who breaks this fellowship of the physical life also breaks the fellowship of the Spirit.”*
- Bonhoeffer, like many before and after him realized that Christian togetherness is practical, physical and logistical, because it’s Spiritual.
- If we do not continue in this rich and world changing tradition, if we don’t invite, if we aren’t relentlessly welcoming, if we aren’t kind, considerate, self sacrificing (even in the terribly small things) we aren’t Christian. We, not “the church”, not that life group, not “that guy over there”, we, all of us, together. We’re all responsible, all the time. It’s what defines us.

Discussion Questions:

- Other than the examples covered in the sermon, can you think of other areas of Scripture that point to the welcoming/invitational/hospitable nature of God?
- Why does God choose to include humans in his “master plan of welcome”? What do you think he, or we gain through welcoming as he welcomes?
- Share a time you experienced or extended welcome or invitation, and what came of it?
- How far should we go with this? Should welcome or invitation be a facet of our church? How vital is it?
- How do you express welcome, serve others, or express care for another person best? What works for you?
- How can we improve on this as individuals? As a church?

