

“Welcoming One Another Home”

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Romans 14:7-13, 15:5-7 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 2, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might find an irresistible solace in this place that we can't help but share. Amen.

You know I love to talk about food. And you know that I love to talk about the connection between food and love. So I want you to pause for a moment and think about your favorite food. Now, I'm aware that it's hard to choose. There can be a lot of categories for favorite foods: favorite celebration food, favorite junk food, favorite food to make, favorite food that someone else makes, favorite dish at your favorite restaurant... you see what I mean. But right now, I want you to think about what your favorite comfort food is. What is the food that makes you feel like you're five and comfortably embraced on a loving grandmother's lap? Or nestled in with a blanket on an old couch? Or wearing a comfy sweater, sitting on a swing on an enclosed porch while it rains? Does anyone want to share what that food is for you? Does anyone have one that you think is probably unusual?

I think for me, that food is probably pie, cherry pie or peach pie, and that's largely because my mom makes great pie. But here's another thing I know about pie: there are entire magazine articles dedicated to the proposition that pie is disgusting. I don't understand these people, but apparently they exist. If you are one of them, I hope there is some other dessert that you enjoy. Or that you get to eat a lot of chips or something.

I want us to think about what makes us feel at home because during the month of June, as we get ready to launch a new ministry year, we're going to focus again on our identity and purpose as a congregation, and today that means thinking deeply about what it means to "share the joy of Christ's welcome." It's not just food, of course, that makes us feel at home; food is just one example that's easy to talk about.

The thing about sharing is that you can't share something unless you already have it. So if we're going to share Christ's welcome, we need to first understand and embrace what it means to have received Christ's welcome. What does it feel like to be welcomed home by God? How does it impact our lives to remember that we are part of the family of God? For some, it can be an extension of loving family relationships we've enjoyed our whole lives. For others, whose families have not provided unconditional love and acceptance, it can be both a challenging experience and a healing one. But for all of us, imagining what that welcome is like once in a while can keep us grounded in the love of God we are called to live and share. So put on your imagination hat for a moment and consider what it looks like for you to experience the welcome of Christ Jesus. What is the room like that you're being invited into? What is keeping you warm or cool? What kinds of foods are on the table? What can you hear? What do you smell? What are the words you need to hear to know that you are seen and safe and beloved? What is it that helps you relax your tensed muscles and breathe deeply? Is that feeling of acceptance something you usually experience here at church? What could we do differently so that you feel it more often when you're here? (Please tell me later; I want to know!)

It is important that we spend time connecting with that feeling of enthusiastic welcome, that understanding that God is so very, very glad that you exist, that you're here, that you're you. I hope that you have those moments when you're. I hope that our celebration of communion each week takes you there. I hope that when you hear those words from Psalm 139, trying to describe just how thoroughly God knows you, that they sound like words of joy and praise, and not like an invasion of your privacy that could lead to judgment. You've heard me say it before: God knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more deeply than we can even imagine. There is, as the psalmist notes, something overwhelming about that, but in a good way.

The thing is, Jesus makes clear that we don't have to fully comprehend the love of God to start sharing it. But we do need to share it. This is a two-step process, a constantly repeating two-step process: receive Christ's welcome, share Christ's welcome, receive Christ's welcome, share Christ's welcome, receive God's love, share God's love, receive God's mercy, share God's mercy, and on and on.

And we know that that is both simple and hard at the same time. Sometimes we're too needy to share. Sometimes we're too tired. Sometimes people are really unlovable. And sometimes we forget that not everyone loves pie.

When Paul was writing to the Romans, here in chapters 14 & 15, he was trying to help them resolve divisions about, yep, food. The question was whether meat that had been sacrificed to idols was something Christians could eat. Now Paul, who knew those idols were false, personally believed that meat was just meat. If you wanted to eat meat,

that was meat you could eat, because the fact that someone had sacrificed it to a false god and then it was put up for sale in that false god's temple meat shop meant nothing, because the god was false. But many of those early Christians had been surrounded by the worship of those other gods their entire lives and had a hard time seeing them as nothing. So that meat seemed tainted to them, in ways that made them see it as something to be avoided. And what did Paul say about that? Did he tell them that they just needed to try harder to understand that the meat was fine, it was just meat, and they should get over their hang-ups? No, he did not say that. He said that the people who were fine with eating the meat should avoid doing it when in the company of the people for whom it was problematic, because the more important thing was to be sensitive and loving to your fellow Christians. Don't pass judgment; it's not your place, Paul told them. Welcoming others as Christ welcomes us leaves no room for judging others or mocking others or flaunting our differing beliefs in ways that make things harder for others.

Some people don't like pie. If I want to welcome someone and truly help them feel at home, I need to stop assuming that my comfort food is their comfort food, and instead listen and learn what actually feels welcoming to them. Loving our neighbors as ourselves does not mean loving others exactly the way we want to be loved. It means loving them with knowledge about who they are and what they need as deep as our knowledge of the desires of our own hearts. Now, obviously, we're never going to know someone else as well as we know ourselves, but we can try. If we set aside our own

assumptions about what is good and what is home and what is welcoming; if we listen deeply to others' stories and journeys, without filling in the gaps with our own stuff; if we embrace the idea that the people of God are rich and diverse beyond our imagining, we can begin to love one another with the love of Jesus. This is what it is to pass the peace of Christ. This is what it is to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. This is what it is to share the joy of Christ's welcome.

The deep joy, the solace, the strength that comes from being fully known and deeply loved, that is a gift we can share with one another. It works best when we are fully grounded in it ourselves, truly and thoroughly aware of our own unconditioned belovedness, so that we can extend that accepting, cherishing compassion to someone else, even someone whose idea of home and welcome is entirely different than ours. This is what it means to be the body of Christ for the glory of God. It's a two-part, living love. It's like breathing, which makes sense because it's empowered by the Spirit. The love comes in, and the love goes out. [arm motions] The love comes in, and the love goes out. Do it with me. The loves come in, and the love goes out. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you. Hallelujah and Amen.