



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JULY 2, 2017
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Welcome Table Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42

Last week, a friend from seminary days published an article in his church newsletter which offered helpful hints about how to make a guest feel welcome at church. He wrote:

First impressions count for everything once something or someone has motivated an individual to visit our church the first time or so.

We want visitors to see that we are friendly, but smothering and/or nosy do not translate into friendliness.

Visitors usually enjoy meeting a number of people briefly.

They should be given the opportunity to meet the Pastor if they choose.

Visitors generally do not appreciate having one person monopolize their time or trap them in one location.

They do not want to hear anything about people and situations in the church, present or past, that make/made you angry.

They do not want to tell you their life stories, nor do they want to hear yours.

Should they visit again, they will be pleased if you remember their names.

Deacons have become aware that they may have to intercede when they witness or are made aware of these behaviors that drive people away from us. Best case scenarios are those in which the simple warmth and kindness of our members and established friends are shared naturally and in small doses.¹

I read that list with both appreciation and humor, especially the part about the Deacons being on alert to monitor the ways in which members greet guests. I'm warning you now: our Deacons are watching you! Above all, I am

¹David A. Farmer, "Considering: The Courtesy of Greeting Visitors," *Inside Silverside* (Silverside Church, Wilmington, Delaware: July/August 2017).

grateful that such warmth and kindness do come natural to our folks here at Lakeside. I often hear how friendly and welcoming we are, and I am grateful.

My friend's article got me to thinking about how I feel when I enter an unfamiliar setting and become dependent on other people to make me feel welcome. One of the things I love about my work is the opportunity to attend conferences and workshops that feature insightful speakers and provocative topics that make me think in ways I might not otherwise consider. I enjoy a comfortable lecture hall or meeting room where I am prodded and poked to think about life and faith and how the two attract and repel one another like two horseshoe magnets put end to end.

The thing I often don't like about such conferences is the dreaded meal. Don't get me wrong—I love to eat! But it is the choosing of where to sit that I don't like. I am relieved when there is assigned seating so you take what you get. When it is open season on seats, however, I panic. How many of you have gone through a buffet line only to reach the end and turn to face a sea of tables where empty seats are scattered here and there. Your eyes dart from table to table to see if there is a face you recognize from the lecture you just heard or from the morning registration line, someone who said "Hello" and smiled at you to indicate that they would be at least tolerant of sharing a table with you. The worse thing is to recognize such a face and even make eye contact and get the nod of the head indicating that you can come sit there but just before you reach the table, someone plops their plate down and jumps into the seat before you can. They, too, saw the face and got the nod.

Eventually you find a seat and discover that most of the folks at the table probably share your anxiety and are relieved that someone actually wants to sit with them. You share the meal, exchange brief bios, chat about the lecture and the prime rib and by the time the cheesecake and coffee have been served, you are old friends and those fears have subsided—until you do it all again the next day!

Many of us feel that anxiety in similar situations all the time. Where will I find someone who will welcome me? Will I sit next to someone who will accept me? What I have realized, however, is that I rarely, if ever, think about becoming the person who welcomes the other me's of the world. What would it be like if I got to the line early and chose an empty table and then filled it up with people who are looking for someone who will welcome them? What if I dared host a "welcome table"?

As Jesus prepared his twelve disciples to go out on mission without him, he reminded them that not everyone will want to hear what they have to say. Not everyone will welcome them. He wanted them to go share the Good News with other Jews first, but he cautioned them that he was sending them out like “sheep in the midst of wolves.” He warned them that at times they might be arrested and called in front of the authorities. He advised them that the welcome mat would not be out at every place they went. “But,” he said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcome the one who sent me.”

Several years ago, one of our members was at a graduate school alumni banquet and met a woman who had recently graduated herself. A few minutes later, she met the woman’s husband and had a nice long conversation with him before discovering that he was Noel Peter Stookey of the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary. If you welcome me, you welcome the people closest to me!

Over the years I have dined at some wonderfully welcoming tables and met some wonderfully interesting people. Yet, there is only one table where I knew from the start that I and everyone else was welcome without hesitation. That is this table, the table of our Lord. It is truly the Welcome Table.

The Jews have their Seder table where they celebrate the Passover feast and remember what God did for their ancestors and anticipate what God will yet do when the Messiah comes. The Lord’s Table, however, is where we celebrate that the Messiah has come and remember everything he did and continues to do in our lives. It is the one table where each of us has a permanent reservation but there is always room for one more. It is the only table where a person is not denied a seat for any reason. Dinner attire, social standing, education, economic status, ethnicity, race, gender, or any other way you can think to parse the human race do not matter at this table. If you welcome me, you welcome the Father.

This week we celebrate the birth of our nation. It was founded on one basic premise: freedom. People all over the world have heard the invitation to freedom and come to America. Today our country is one of the most diverse and richly cultured nations in the world. Yet, not everyone is welcome here. We have had struggles from the start. We have struggles today because, regardless of the invitation, we do not always want the door open to everyone.

Our Lord's Table is truly the welcome table for no one is ever turned away. Jesus said, "My house is a house of prayer for all people" (Mark 11:17). God's grace of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life are offered to everyone. God's invitation to abundant life is sent to every human who draws breath on this planet. At this table, there is always a seat for whoever wants to join the feast.

"If you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me." The One who sent Jesus created the world and all that is in it. That includes you and me and the whole world. There is a place for us at the table . . . and we are welcomed! Thanks be to God!

July 2, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the Creator of nations and the Granter of liberty, we come to offer our thanks and praise this day for the freedoms and blessings that are ours in this great land. Our hearts are filled with gratitude for the freedom to work, to learn, to speak, to worship. We thank you for men and women who sacrifice so much to secure liberty for us and for peoples around the world. Even as we celebrate and enjoy these good gifts you have offered, our hearts are also heavy and our thoughts confused from the events of the week, and we gather to worship with a myriad of questions and emotions, seeking solace in our pain. We have wept with members of our church family through the grief of losing loved ones and the fear of medical crises. We have watched in horror as images of senseless violence fill our television screens, political tensions mount, and people around the globe suffer because of poverty and disease; and we have confronted our own fears and uncertainties in light of our neighbors' suffering.

But still we come to worship, O God. We come because in this place and among these, our brothers and sisters, we find strength and comfort. We come because you bless our doubts and call us to trust in spite of them. We come because we seek to put aside our desire for vengeance and to follow your way of peace. We come because we are filled with resurrection hope because Christ has conquered sin and death for us and for all of creation. Every need we have we entrust to you, and for every gift we receive we offer to you our thanks, most Gracious and Holy God.

Were it not for our faith, the challenges which confront us might be enough to lead us to despair, O God. Instead you have called us to respond with generous hearts, with discerning minds, and with diligent hands, believing that what we do in this place and what we carry with us from this place will make a difference in our lives and in our world. Teach us to reach beyond ourselves and our comfortable places to ease the suffering that engulfs so many lives. Grant us wisdom and courage to face the complexities of our world and to seek solutions with creativity and mercy. Give us grace as we struggle with our often competing responsibilities of seeking change where it is needed and peace where it is possible. Help us to be a people of compassion and to respond to those in need out of the abundance we have received from you. Teach us to be merciful even as we have been shown great mercy. As we prepare to gather around your table, hear now, O Lord, these prayers of our hearts and those offered by your children of every language and nation, through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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