

On Being a Welcoming Community

Steve Jourdain

Luke chapter 14 verses 15 to 24

Today is the first Sunday of our 'Welcome Month'. For some time now, St Albans has had a 'Student Welcome Sunday' on the day before Massey lectures start, with a BBQ after the 10.30am service, as a way of welcoming new students and returning students to St Albans.

Late last year the 'Fishtank' housegroup of young adults suggested that we extend the welcome over 4 weeks and the Church Council recognised that it may not only be students who are newcomers, visiting us and looking for a new church home. So we are calling these next 4 Sundays 'Welcome Month', and we've arranged for two homes to host any newcomers for lunch after this service (if they'd like to go) and on the 4th Sunday we'll have our BBQ lunch after church. And I've got to add, just because this is 'Welcome Month' it DOESN'T mean that we won't be welcoming at other times!

Today I want to speak about 'Being a Welcoming Community'. At our Church Council Retreat Day late last year, we began reviewing our church's mission and strategies and values. For me, one essential value or principle for any church community which seeks to be the body of Christ, is to be a welcoming community. Such a value could be expressed as:

'We believe that the church should be a welcoming, invitational community which warmly invites others into Christian conversation and community.'

This value or principle recognises two important fundamentals:

- God is a welcoming, invitational God.
- Church Research and our own experience shows that most people come to faith in Jesus because some Christian person was willing to share their faith and invite them into Christian conversation and into a Christian Community.
- Take a moment to think and talk with your neighbour about:

What Bible passages or principles show that God is welcoming and invitational?

Here are some examples: The creation of the world and humanity had the sole purpose of establishing fellowship with God. The Covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Israelites through Moses, were relationships of worship and service between God and God's chosen people. The role of the prophets was to call/invite people back into relationship with God when they had ignored God and done their own thing.

The new Covenant relationship which God established by sending his only Son. The life and ministry of Jesus was one continuing invitation into the Kingdom of God and a relationship with his Father.

Think of Jesus' invitational words, "Come follow me" (he said to his disciples), "Come and see" he said to seekers, "Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden.." (he said to the needy). In Revelation, "The Bride and the Spirit say 'Come'". Think of the parables of the lost coin, sheep and sons; his care for the sick, outcasts, women and children.

The whole message of Jesus, the Gospel, is basically, inherently invitational.

An English Theologian has said, "Heaven is the destiny God intends for all people. Hell is for those who refuse God's invitation. God's invitation comes to us through Jesus Christ." Some Christians, when they share the gospel message focus more on people being sinners than on God's invitation.

Let's look at the parable or story of the Great Banquet. It's more of an allegory than a parable, as the details represent certain things rather than the story having one single point.

Read the story of Luke chapter 14 verses 15 to 24. God is the man who throws a party and invites many guests. Now that is very interesting and encouraging in itself. The Kingdom of Heaven is portrayed like a great party with fun, laughter, food, conversation, joy, music - just like a church camp or concert or Parachute festival ! A foretaste of heaven!

Do you think of God as a party person, a party thrower?

Some Christians behave as though God is more like a party pooper! with more focus on God's disapproval of sin than God's loving welcome and invitation. Jesus often went to parties and often mixed with undesirables. (Max Lucado story 'When Jesus went to parties') This did not imply Jesus' approval of all the behaviour at the party, but his love and concern for the well-being of the party-goers and of his welcome/invitation into the Kingdom of God.

So in the parable, God was a party thrower and Jesus was his servant, inviting guests to the party. This is the nature of God. God longs for relationships with everyone he has created. God welcomes and invites our friendship, our membership into his family.

What people do with God's invitation, like the people in the story, is their business. But one of the responses God wants from those of us who say 'Yes' to his invitation, is to be like him - welcoming, invitational people.

This brings us to the second point - How did you come to faith in Jesus?

Hands up if you became a Christian through the friendship and influence of another Christian, friend or family member? Hands up those who didn't?

Our own experience and Christian research shows that most people (80-90%) come to faith through a Christian family member or friend inviting them to come to church or to explore Christian faith in conversation. So we need to be welcoming/inviting people.

How can we be welcoming/invitational people as individuals and as a church?

1. Talking to newcomers and visitors at church events.

Look out for them, make a conscious decision to go and say, "Hi, I haven't met you before OR Have I met you before?" Forget your friends first up because they will still talk to you and you know where they live. I've seen visitors stand on the footpath afterwards or in the hall having a cuppa alone. A warm welcome first-up can make the difference between people coming again or not. Research shows that calling on newcomers within the following week after attending Sunday worship is most likely to encourage them to join that congregation.

I spoken to members of this congregation and others who aren't, who, when newcomers to St As, were not spoken to in their early weeks by anyone, except sometimes by other newcomers. Any less committed people would have left by now. Not to mention those who've never come back!

2. Smiling/Greeting people in the street, especially in a small towns.

A woman who had attended our Dannevirke church told me that she had not come back to worship because she was put off by people she met on Sundays, ignoring her in the street on Monday. I suggested that people may not recognise her out of the church context but she replied, "What, people who had spent 10 minutes having a cup of tea with me?" So the moral is, say hi to everyone you meet in the street!

My children used to get embarrassed about me saying hi to everyone I met in our early years here. "Who's that Dad they'd ask?" "I don't know" I'd say. "Then why did you talk to them?" they'd reply! But ministers cannot afford to not be friendly.

3. Inviting newcomers to lunch or calling to visit them.

When did you last do that? And if you didn't get or remember their name and address - contact me, I'm sure to have it! Eg: Katrina McLean, a missionary in Colombia and supported by this church for 13 years. She was home on furlough with little Alex from Nov to Jan., for the first time in 3 years and will not be back for another 3 years. While she was here for 9 weeks, 2 of which she was away, she was invited into only 3 homes. Does that show good pastoral care for one of our missionaries?

4. Inviting people to church events - to Sunday worship, home-groups, women's groups; or asking if they would like their children to attend Sunday School or Youth group.

I heard some time ago of a man who had watched his Christian neighbours go to church for many years. When they eventually asked him if he would like to come with them, he said, "I've been waiting for you to invite me for years!" Isn't that amazing?

Some people don't know they can come to church uninvited; they don't know what goes on inside and are scared. Some think they need an invitation if they don't belong to that denomination. If you're not comfortable to invite friends to our services or church events, please tell me what we need to do to change that.

5. Building friendships with non-Christians through normal everyday contacts, inviting them home, initiating conversation about faith-matters, and through serving/helping/assisting others. We need to pray and be seeking opportunities to use our relationships to invite people into Christian conversation and community. (remember David Watson's prayer)

I want to finish with a story;

This story is about Tony Campolo, a prominent Christian Professor and Preacher from the USA (some of you have heard him speak on visits to NZ). When speaking in Hawaii but not having adjusted to the change in time zones, Tony took a walk at three in the morning and wandered into a diner. The other customers were a group of prostitutes who had finished for the night, one of whom, named Agnes, mentioned in conversation with the diner owner Harry, that tomorrow was her birthday and that she had never in her life had a birthday party.

After the women left, Tony found out from Harry behind the counter, that they came into this diner every night when they finished. Tony asked if he could come back the next night and throw a party. Harry said okay, but only on the condition that his wife do the cooking and he be allowed to make the cake. Here is the story as Tony tells it.

"At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday Agnes".

Harry and his wife must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3.15am every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall to wall prostitutes, and me!

At 3:30 the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready, and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy Birthday!" Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open, and her legs buckled. When we finished singing, her eyes moistened; when the cake was carried out, she started to cry.

Harry gruffly mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes. Come on! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles.' Finally, he did. The cutting of the cake took even longer. "Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake."

"Look, Harry, is it ok if I keep the cake a little while; if we don't eat it right away?"

"Sure. If you want to keep it, keep it. Take the cake home if you want."

"Can I?" Then looking at me: "I just live down the street. I want to take the cake home, OK? I'll be right back". She carried that cake out the door like it was the Crown Jewels.

We stood there motionless, a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes; for her salvation, that her life would be changed; that God would be good to her. When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and said with a trace of irritation: "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments of rare inspiration when the right words just come, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3.30am!"

Harry waited a moment and almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was I'd join it."

Wouldn't you like to join such a church. That's the kind of church Jesus came to create. I don't know where we got the other kind that is so prim and proper! But anyone who reads the New Testament knows that Jesus loved to lavish grace on the left-outs and the used-up and the put-down.

John Ortberg writes, "The church is supposed to be a group of rag dolls who have received love even though they didn't deserve it, and who then extend that love to others because they refuse to allow the raggedness of others to keep them from loving." (In 'Love beyond Reason' by John Ortberg)

How can we, as individuals and a church, be more welcoming and grace-giving in this new year, to newcomers to our church?

to the left-out and the put-down and the used-up in our community?

to the friends and family members that we've known for years, but who don't know Jesus yet?

Lets start today, at this service, by taking a risk and speaking to someone whom we don't yet know.