

Sermon “Let Us Welcome One Another”

Kirk of St James

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I don't know about you, but I am far more likely to make resolutions in September instead of January. There is something about summer ending and life going back into routine that makes change feel possible. If I am going to try and eat healthier or get on the move more, this is the time of year I at least resolve to try and do it! That being said the time of year has no bearing whatsoever on the success of the resolution, as I have discovered.

The funny thing is often the things we resolve to do are incredibly good things, they are things we hold up as ideals, we believe they are the things that will make us into the best people we can be. It is just that so often expectations and reality collide and that can be discouraging. Today's bible passages deal with some of these themes of expectation and disappointment in our lives as Christians. We go into Christian community with the expectation that things will be a certain way, and then reality hits, it is not as we expect, and it feels like there has been this catastrophic failure. If we were really Christians, if we really loved one another, then this would not happen. If this were truly a Christian community we would always get along, and things would be perfect. The same can go for our own lives as well, the expectation that as a Christian we always do things right.

Our passage today is part of a larger section where Jesus is dealing with life in the church. What is interesting is that the Christian community that Jesus is picturing is not a perfect one. In fact, it is one that involves forgiveness, people who make mistakes, and a group of people that are often far from perfect! It is a church where everyone has equal importance, much like when Paul talks about the church as the various parts of the body. No body part is more

important than another, because we are all part of the same thing, and work together for good. That being said this does not mean we are all the same.

One of the greatest treasures and strengths in community is that we each have different thoughts, gifts, and opinions, it is these differences that give us richness and depth. That is part of what makes us the unique community that we are. Churches are made up of an amazing tapestry of people, experiences, gifts, cultures, and practices. It is incredible when you think about the breadth of knowledge and experience sitting here together. Throughout the year we host fundraisers, outreach, community events and more. Week in and week out we share in one another's joy as children are born and baptized, when weddings and birthdays come up, and when we have good news to share. At the same time, we come along side of each other in sadness and sorrow. We have pulled together to support areas hit by tragedy in other parts of the world. As a minister it is an honor to be part of this community. As a community we are always looking toward Christ. We are always looking to follow his example in our lives.

Being a Christian does not mean being perfect. We are going to mess up and make mistakes and not do things right. It is interesting because over the years I have met people who say things like, "once I get my life back in order I will come to church." The idea that we need to be a certain amount of pulled together or perfect before we can even go to church can become an obstacle. We feel like there is no room for the messiness of our lives within the walls of God's church. However, Jesus showed us repeatedly, this Good News, this gospel of hope reaches us at all ages and stages in our lives, both when we feel pulled together and in order, but even more importantly when we feel our most broken. God tells us to give up the jagged pieces of our lives so we can be healed.

I am not sure about you, but I do not like conflict. I always find this passage challenging because I always assume that conflict is a bad thing. This passage today suggests Jesus expected it. It was not a matter of if people would fight, disagree, or wound one another, but about how we go about addressing and resolving the issues when they happen.

I deeply appreciate that we love a God who knows how difficult life can be, that we are not set with the impossible task of having to be always perfect. Jesus essentially says, "when things go wrong like I know they can, here is how to find your way back, here is how to heal and reconcile." One of the important things that we do as a church is find ways to invite people into community. A few verses earlier in Matthew was the story where Jesus welcomes the children and bids us to welcome others. As one author asked "if we in the Church do not forgive, or heal, or welcome, who on earth is going to do it? If the Church no matter how small, even just two or three believers—will agree in Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond. The Church will really be the Church because Jesus will be present."

In some ways Autumn and September are like a new year. Summer on the east coast is a unique experience as we take a break from routines and life, and we live in the beauty of what creation offers. And now as September has arrived, we prepare for the year ahead of us. We slip back into our routines, and we sign up for new things, or favorite hobbies. Perhaps some resolutions we can all challenge ourselves too in the year to come, is to resolve to be welcoming, to be loving, and reconciling as we seek to follow in the footsteps of Christ who calls us to this work.

I also want to acknowledge that there have been times when decisions have been made that go way beyond a bad idea, or a disagreement, and becomes something damaging and harmful in the worst ways possible--the residential school system in Canada being a prime

example. This is something we are going to pick up at the end of the month for Orange Shirt Day, (The National day for Truth and Reconciliation). We will be using Justice Ministries resources for that service, and see where it leads us, as there are a lot of additional resources and possibilities, like workshops, or studies to better inform ourselves.