

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

There are always three settings to consider as we hear the words of Jesus. The first is what was happening in the moment he is saying them...the audience, the circumstances that led to the teaching or action being narrated, the politics of the possible conflict he might be addressing.

The second setting is those who were hearing these stories told to them after the ascension. In the early days of the church, these growing – but struggling – communities were working to interpret, not only what the stories of Jesus meant about God, but how they were going to have an impact on their lives...on what it meant to be Christian.

Generations later is the third setting, the here and now, not always that different from those early Christians, and informed by their experiences – especially as we hear those interpretations canonized in what has become our Bible.

We have to be aware of these lenses and the unique challenges and influences they bring to what we hear and experience. When we don't pay attention – at least a little bit – to the lens we bring to our hearing, then we run the risk of missing something important about what God is saying or doing. Or at least, we might not see the whole picture.

It matters that these words of Jesus are spoken to the twelve at the end of what has come to be known as the missionary discourse. All that we've been hearing over the past few weeks about the disciples being sent out to proclaim God's peace, being sent out like sheep among the wolves, with words that will bring division even as they proclaim peace. All those instructions conclude with this promise that **God is in the hospitality**.

That word "receive" is used six times in two verses to emphasize what it means to be welcomed in the name of God and to welcome others in the name of God. Jesus wraps up the whole idea of proclamation and evangelism – in its very first days – with the promise that God is welcomed when the little ones are welcomed.

We've spent generations since wondering exactly who these "little ones" are and what it means to be welcomed.

The community that formed around this Gospel – the first hearers of the story being passed down as recent history – was one of growing persecution and division. For them, God came not to bring peace but division because they were forming themselves out of their Jewish roots. They were claiming a new identity that wasn't as simple as the one they had claimed as God's chosen people of Israel.

In the millennia since they claimed that identity and became Christians, we've continued to wonder, argue, fight, and kill over who gets to claim that identity with us. We've questioned who the "little ones" are so that we could make sure to define who we were going to allow into our fellowship – who we were going to receive in the name of Christ, in the name of God. And we haven't done a very good job of that.

The institutional church constructed a lens through which it would come to define the rules instead of proclaiming the inclusive identity of Christ-follower and all that it means to live into being a child of God.

We gather on this Reconciling in Christ Sunday to recognize, proclaim, and celebrate the diversity in which God has made all humanity and through that diversity has offered us the love and grace that Jesus enfleshed in the world.

Like many of you, I'm sure, it has been a journey to understand that diversity. I grew up in the era of Three's Company and Bosom Buddies. You might remember those sitcoms that didn't hide from gender identity and sexuality...but instead turned it into a punchline. In Three's Company, Jack Ritter's sexuality was a cover story so that he could live with two women. The landlords, the Roper's, weren't progressive enough to let three adults share an apartment, but they also were very willing to make fun of Jack, whose cover story was that he was gay.

Bosom Buddies made cross-dressing the punchline of two men trying to find affordable housing. Much like Jack, they were embracing something that wasn't actually part of their identity to make life work and it was comedy gold for the 1980s. Because in the 1980s, gender and sexuality were nothing more than a joke to be told. Mainstream society – where I lived – wasn't receptive to LGBTQIA2S+ folks. They weren't welcome except to be ridiculed and **maybe** tolerated from a distance.

My understanding of welcome started to change when I met my mother-in-law. I won't regale you with the ins and outs of what it was like for Laurel and me as we were dating, but my perspective started to shift as I came to know and love someone who was openly gay – as open as you could be in the early 90s. It was treated less like a joke, but it's not like she didn't have to hide it almost always. It's not like she was really welcomed into society. For the first time in my life, it truly was a personal experience for me to try to understand hospitality to someone who was gay.

Eventually my journey added a theological lens. What had been a story of my personal relationships with my mother-in-law, with a roommate who came out as bisexual, with an apartment mate who was gay, with an uncle who was finally out of the closet – the

story of those relationships intersected with the journey towards being a pastor and trying to understand what God was doing.

And in that part of the journey, what had been an attempt to love people I didn't understand became a recognition of what it really meant to welcome God into our communal life. "Whoever welcomes...the one who sent me" wasn't about tolerance and continued ignorance. And by that, I mean the unwillingness to learn, the willingness to remain ignorant **and** ignoring someone's gender or sexuality because you don't want to "promote" them or, while clutching pearls, be changed by them.

Welcoming **all** our siblings in Christ means that we celebrate their identity as a Child of God. Beloved. No different than those of us who are cisgendered and/or heterosexual. That's God's lens for creation and the one we celebrate and proclaim to a hostile world.

I've grown up and lived my life with just about every privilege of power this society has to offer. I am as far from the "little ones" Jesus centers in this final promise of the missionary discourse. And I am reminded this day – and should be reminded every day – of my need to welcome beloved siblings in Christ fully into my life and into the community I'm called to serve.

We proclaimed our willingness to be a Reconciling in Christ congregation mere days after this country inaugurated an administration that wants to pretend LGBTQIA2S+ people don't matter, and in some cases are trying to deny their existence. We claimed our identity as allies to our siblings at a time when we only had begun to recognize what it would mean to welcome them. Our work didn't end in that moment.

We celebrate God's beloved creation and all its diversity today to welcome those who have been marginalized throughout history and face trauma every day. We remind ourselves who are allies that we are charged by God to welcome. Period. Exclamation point. Amen.