

What’s your welcome story? We all have one. Last week during the sermon Pastor Vern asked you to share with each other a time when you felt welcome – and, brave Lutherans that you are, you did. There was a lot of energy in the building that morning! Vern said some of you even chased him down in the narthex to tell him about your experience. Excellent. I had someone tell me that it was the first time they’ve ever had a personal conversation with another person here at Zumbro. It reminds me that it’s possible to slip in and out of church without ever making a connection. And while some people just want to be anonymous, that’s not what being church is all about. It’s about really knowing and caring about one another. That’s what fosters a spirit of welcome.

I think the welcome story question resonated because everyone knows what it’s like to be new – we’ve all experienced a first day in a new school, or starting a new job, or moving to a new town, or checking out a new church. When you’re on the outside, there’s nothing like seeing a smiling face or having someone go out of their way to talk to you to make you feel like you really belong, is there?

But today I want us to take a step back, and imagine that instead of the new person looking to belong, we’re on the other side. We’re the ones doing the welcoming. Now, everyone likes to say that their church is warm and inviting. So, on a scale of 1-10, how friendly do you think you are? How about our church as a whole? Are we really as friendly as we think we are? Before you answer that, let me say that someone in the office asked Pastor Wayne this question last week, and his answer was, “I don’t think I’m that friendly.” Well, I happen to think that Wayne is about one of the friendliest people I know, so if he doesn’t measure up ... let’s just say we all have a little work ahead of us.

That question gets right at the heart of our theme for the year, *creating a place for all to belong*. Because you don’t belong someplace if you don’t get there first. Studies show that one of the most effective ways of getting people someplace is to invite them, and that the best invitations are based on relationship – relationship that’s cultivated by honesty, trust, and attention. But for too long the church has taken the *comebackwhen* approach to invitation. “Young adults will *comebackwhen* they have children.” “Those busy parents of teenagers will *comebackwhen* their kids head off to

college.” “Baby boomers will *comebackwhen* they retire and are looking to volunteer their time.” We assume that 1) people will come back to the faith of their childhood and that 2) once they get here – and that they will, on their own, get here – they’ll fit right in and feel welcome. Guess what ... those assumptions aren’t working anymore. And too often we’re hesitant to invite others to church because we don’t want to look pushy or offend someone or we’re just not sure what to say in the first place. But I think we make it too complicated. Our gospel lesson for today is a great example that when we’re trying to reach out to someone, a little friendliness goes a long way.

To be honest, I’m not sure ‘friendly’ is a word I’d use to describe John the Baptist. With his wild hair and sharp tongue, he’s not going to garner many votes in a Mr. Popularity contest. But I will say this: with John, what you see is what you get. He is passionate about the coming Messiah. He doesn’t apologize for what he believes. He’s not afraid to get people’s attention. But notice how he does it: by practicing what he preaches. People can trust John because he’s not holding anything back. And that is a characteristic of being friendly: *Friendly people are transparent*. They don’t hide who they really are. Maybe that means you’ve got a cross around your neck or a ZLC magnet on your refrigerator or mention that your weekend plans include going to church. But even if you wouldn’t think to do any of those things, you are still a walking advertisement for Jesus Christ. So, what are you advertising these days? Are the people around you buying it?

In case you don’t know her, Koni Grimsrud is the kind of person who wears her heart and her faith on her sleeve. It’s part of who she is. That goes a long way in making her approachable and trustworthy. In November she mentioned to some friends that we were trying a new, contemplative service on Wednesday nights in Advent. She told them how excited she was to check it out. These friends aren’t regular church-goers; in fact, Koni wasn’t expecting them to do anything about it. But lo and behold, the first Weds of Advent rolled around and her friends showed up at church. I’m guessing they came because they know and love Koni and her family, and by extension figured that something that fed her might also mean something to them. Friendly people are transparent, so that people around them can see what following Jesus looks like.

A second quality: *Friendly people are willing to be inconvenienced*. We don’t know what Jesus was doing in today’s gospel; he hadn’t yet started his ministry and

wasn't ready to go public with his new identity. At this point he was still Jesus the carpenter, not Jesus the Christ. But notice when John's disciples call him Rabbi, and ask where he's staying, he doesn't just tell them, he invites them to come along. They end up sticking around all evening. By the end of the night, their lives have been changed – and, I'd be willing to bet, so has his.

So often we think we want to help, but only when it fits into our schedule or if we're doing something we like. But people who are truly welcoming put themselves and their needs second. They make others feel as though they are the most important person in the world. That's welcoming.

Last Weds. night after church I stopped by Herberger's to pick up a birthday present for my mom. I knew exactly what I wanted to get, but since I don't shop much, I had no idea where to find it. Because the store was about to close, instead of wandering around, I asked a woman who was restocking some shelves for help. Now, she could have just pointed me in the right direction, especially since the department I was looking for was clear on the other side of the store. But instead, she stopped what she was doing and said, "let me take you there." As a customer, that made me feel like my business really mattered to her. What if – when God puts a chance to serve in front of you – what if instead of thinking, *I don't have time for this* or *what's in it for me*, what if you thought, *Thanks, God, for choosing me to help*. Yes, it might be an inconvenience, but lives just might get changed in the process – maybe even yours.

A third thing: *Friendly people are brave*. They're willing to take risks because they want to put others at ease. They care deeply and believe they have something important to share. All it took for Andrew was one evening hanging out with Jesus. Whatever it was that he saw and heard made a difference for him. He truly believes this Galilean fisherman is the Messiah, God's chosen one. So once he leaves Jesus the first thing he does is go and find his brother Simon. He tells Simon what's happened, and he brings him to see for himself. That took some courage. He doesn't know how Simon will react or if he even wants to hear it. But Andrew takes that risk because he wants Simon to share the welcome he himself has experienced.

Even if you're the bravest person in the world, that doesn't mean it's always easy to reach out. Sonja and Dave Dunn live over in Kutzky Park. One street in particular has a lot of transitional housing units. Over the years tension has grown between the

homeowners and the renters. It's made the atmosphere of the neighborhood really uncomfortable. Last summer Sonja was part of a team that tried to diffuse some of the tension. They had a couple of community meetings to try and clear the air. They didn't go as well as was hoped. As a last effort, the team planned a big party for National Night Out in August. It was about a hundred degrees that day. They had food and a magician for the kids. There was just one problem: the renters didn't show. It looked like their efforts to reach out were going to waste.

Finally Sonja's daughter Meredith marched up to the first duplex. A few people were just sitting in the yard watching the party with suspicion. Meredith took a deep breath. Come on, she said. This is for you. There's root beer floats. We want you here. Come on over. Meredith and the renters stared at each other for a long minute. And then a couple of people stood up and dragged their lawn chairs across the street. And for a night, at least, a little peace was forged in the neighborhood.

As Pastor Vern said last week, *never underestimate the power of a personal invitation*. I'd like to add, *never underestimate the importance of being friendly*. It matters when we're brave, when we're transparent, when we accept inconvenience so that others might feel welcome and important. Because when it comes to inviting others, we don't have to have the right words or all the answers. In fact, sometimes it just takes three: *come and see*. But what God can do with those three little words just might change the world, one life at a time. Amen.