

“All Are Welcome”

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

All Are Welcome.

At least that’s what the sign said outside of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Bishop Jensen had appointed me as coverage pastor of this inner-city congregation that was in the neighbouring community to where I was serving my first call. My responsibilities were to provide pastoral care to the congregation as it was in transition, essentially everything except Sunday worship. I arrived at the building to meet with the congregational leaders, but at first, I was confused as to how welcome I – or anyone else – really was; the “all are welcome” sign was behind a tall chain-link fence that was secured with a heavy padlock. While the neighbourhood had changed in many ways, I didn’t get the impression that it was any more dangerous than any other part of town; but to the people of the congregation, the threat was great enough for them to erect this fence. While someone did eventually come along and unlock the gate, I left that day wondering how welcoming the people of that congregation really were, or if their “all are welcome” sign was really false advertising.

All are welcome – or are they?

There wasn’t a chain-link fence surrounding the church I visited in Park Ridge, Illinois while I was attending a conference in neighbouring Chicago; but I soon began to wonder if their “all are welcome” sign was as misleading as the one in New Jersey. My first challenge as a visitor was finding an open door; once I discovered a door that was unlocked, I had to find my way through a maze of hallways to the sanctuary. When I finally discovered where the congregation was gathering for worship, I was greeted by a huddle of church members with their backs turned toward me. After a few awkward moments, one of the persons in the huddle realized I was standing there and greeting me with a gruff, “Oh, I guess I’m the greeter – here” as she handed me the bulletin. Throughout the service, I sat by myself, greeted by no one; even as I went through the receiving line following the service, the presence of this stranger went unacknowledged. This happened 25 years ago, but I’ll never forget the experience of feeling unwelcomed in the house of the Lord.

*Are all people **really** welcome in this place?*

In their commissioning as apostles, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ clearly states that the Gospel they will proclaim is to be shared with all people, because Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour of all, and all are welcome in the community of faith that is gathered in his name:

- “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” – Matthew 28:19-20.
- “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’” – Luke 24:45-48.
- “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” – Acts 1:8.

The apostles who received this commissioning may not have been aware of how inclusive and disruptive Jesus' invitation to discipleship would be, but they would soon discover that our Lord would be welcoming persons into his church who had formerly been unwelcome in any of their previous gatherings:

On the day of Pentecost, *"devout Jews from every nation under heaven [were] living in Jerusalem"* (Acts 2:5). These "Diaspora Jews" shared the same faith as the apostles but were from different nations with different languages and customs. Yet it was to these foreigners that Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ; as a result, *"those who welcomed this message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added."* (2:41).

One of these Diaspora Jews, Philip, is led by the Holy Spirit into Samaritan territory, to proclaim the Gospel among a people with whom the Jews had long-standing animosity (*"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans."* – John 4:9). His preaching is warmly received: *"the crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did"* (Acts 8:6). When the apostles in Jerusalem *"heard that the Samaritans had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them"* (8:14), crossing into a territory into which they previously never would have set foot, but which was not a place where all were welcome into Christ's Church, so that when these apostles returned to Jerusalem, they continued *"proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans."* (8:25).

Philip would then be led by an angel of the Lord *"towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza"* 8:26), where he encounters another person to whom a welcome would formerly not have been extended: *"an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury."* (8:27). While as a Jew he would have been welcomed at the Jerusalem Temple, as a eunuch he was barred from becoming a full member of God's people and entering the inner courts of the Temple (*"No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD."* – Deuteronomy 23:1). The Ethiopian had journeyed to worship in the Jerusalem Temple, where the people of Israel heard the invitation of the Psalmist: *"I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"* (Psalm 122:1). But when he arrived, he discovered that he was *not* welcome to enter the house of the Lord, because people with his physical condition were *not* welcome to enter the Temple. When Philip encounters him, he is returning from this disappointing rejection, sitting at the side of the road reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah. But what he did not know at that time was that a seismic shift was taking place, that when Jesus stated that his apostles would be his witnesses *"to the ends of the earth"* that it would mean that doors would be unlocked, chasms breached, walls torn down, and people welcomed into the assembly of God's people who had formerly been excluded. The Holy Spirit directs Philip to speak with the Ethiopian, and through his interpretation of Scripture *"he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus"* (8:35). As they traveled together down that wilderness road, they came to a body of water; the eunuch turns to Philip and declares *"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"* (8:36). The implicit answer is *"nothing!"* so they went into the water and Philip baptized the Ethiopian, welcoming him into the Church of Jesus Christ because *all* are welcome in the fellowship of God's people.

For Peter, his experience in Samaritan territory was only the first experience of the Lord leading him far beyond barriers that had been shattered through Christ's death and resurrection. He is directed to accept an invitation from Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to his house so that he might share the Gospel with the Gentiles who were gathered here. Peter is at first reluctant to accept this invitation, stating that *"it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile"* (10:28). But the apostle comes to the realization that in Jesus Christ anything that had formerly separated people was no longer valid, for *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* (10:34-35). As a result of his preaching to this Gentile audience, *"the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word"* (10:44), an episode often called the "Gentile Pentecost." Seeing that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *"even on the Gentiles,"* Peter asks, *"can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the*

Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47). The logical response must be a resounding "no," for there is nothing that should exclude these repentant Gentiles from their initiation into the faith community.

- "Peter is a witness not only to the historical Jesus but also to the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and its subsequent outpourings in Samaria and now upon the Gentiles." – Robert W. Hall.

The Acts of the Apostles continues the story of how Jesus' command for his followers to proclaim the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" comes to fruition. Through his missionary journeys, Paul brings the good news of Jesus to cities throughout Asia Minor and Europe, sharing God's Word with both Jews and Gentiles who are now joined together in the one body of Christ; as Paul will write in his letter to the Galatians, *"there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28). In Christ, walls that had formerly separate people from God and people from one another have been destroyed so that all might be one through their baptism into Christ Jesus:

- "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... [so that he] might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." – Ephesians 2:13-16.

The Acts of the Apostles has an open ending; its final verse tells us that Paul continues *"proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance."* (Acts 28:31). The acts of the first generation of apostles continues in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" which in every generation is called to *"proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (1 Peter 2:9).

- "This open-ended conclusion implies a challenge to us, [Luke's] readers. The examples of Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, and Paul summon us too to be daring witnesses to Jesus. It is now up to us to continue the proclamation of the gospel boldly and without hindrance, no matter what obstacles we may encounter." – William S. Kurz, SJ.

The followers of Jesus will continue to discover that *"there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,"* that *"all are welcome in this place,"* including people who had formerly been unwelcomed. It is God's Will that his Church continue to *"fling wide the door, unbar the gate,"* breaking down any barriers – physical, social, or psychological – that would keep people away from the life-changing good news that is ours in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet it has been a sad reality that for too long the Church that is called to welcome all people in the name of the Lord has not been faithful to this calling. From the very beginning, churches have conformed themselves to the ways of the world which seek to separate people and keep "outsiders" away from the assembly of God's people rather than being transformed by the one who welcomed the outcasts of society and blessed them as he blesses all people. For too long our doctrines, our liturgies, our buildings, our language, and our policies have been designed to keep outsiders away from our gatherings, unwelcome at our worship services, unworthy to receive the Holy Sacraments, and unimportant because they are not a part of the "in crowd" that too many congregations have become. When we confess that *"we have not loved you with our whole heart, [nor] have we loved our neighbours as ourselves,"* we are confessing that we have not been faithful stewards of the liberating message of the Gospel, the Word of God our Saviour *"who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* (1 Timothy 2:4).

As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this morning, we are once again reminded of the question asked by our ancestors in faith: *"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received*

the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Baptism is a sacrament because it is God's action; it is God claiming us as his beloved children and promising to bless us always. In Baptism, we are born anew through water and the Word and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ. It is God's gift that is freely given to us *"without any merit or worthiness of mine at all"* (*Small Catechism*). Because we have been the recipients of God's gracious love that is the basis of our hope and the foundation of the Church as the "living stones" of God's baptized people, we in turn are called to make certain that there are no walls or fences – physical, social, or psychological – that prevent anyone else from receiving the gift of grace that God desires all people to receive.

- "I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is 'the God of all grace,' in the apostle Peter's words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family." – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Something there is that doesn't love a wall." – Robert Frost.

Walls and fences have their place in certain situations, but they have no place in the Church of Jesus Christ. As the curtain in the Temple was torn in two at the moment of Christ's death, so has his death and resurrection destroyed anything that once separated us from God, as well as those things which continue to separate people from one another. Because Christ has destroyed everything that was once meant to separate and alienate, as people who bear the name of Christ we must make certain that *all are welcome*, as we who once were *"without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world ... have [now] been brought near by the blood of Christ,"* (Ephesians 2:12-13). As Christ has welcomed us *"while we were yet sinners,"* (Romans 5:8), we must welcome all people, because Christ is Lord of all and desires that everyone *"be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* (1 Timothy 2:4).

Thankfully, the physical fence I encountered in New Jersey and the psychological fence that greeted me in Illinois did not keep me separated from God's gracious love. I have experienced many churches where I was warmly welcomed, many congregations that practiced hospitality as a means of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. May our witness in this place be faithful to our boundary-breaking Lord and Saviour, who desires that no fences, no walls, no barriers might *"separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:39).

All are welcome in this place – God's place! Amen.