



Welcoming and Nurturing Community II

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Rev. Sarah Calvert

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I'm usually the guest preacher wherever I go. One habit I picked up to try and understand the community into which I am preaching is to review the demographics of the neighborhood around the church. I don't necessarily look at who is already in the church – I look outside, into the community that surrounds the church for clues as to what might encourage people, be healing, be a challenge. I encourage the pastors I work with to always keep the community in mind when they preach and teach as well. If we preach only to the insiders – only the insiders get the good news. If we consciously preach to the larger context, then when a visitor comes, or when someone invites a friend to join them, we can be more relevant and connecting to a larger whole.

I do these same habits –checking in on the demographics – are helpful in developing hospitality and welcoming structures for a church. If we know our neighbors better – the ones less like us – we can be prepared to welcome them in a way that is more authentic and welcoming.

Here's what I found out about you – there are about 30,000 people in this greater Alexandria neighborhood. 73% are White, 15% are African American/Black, 6% are Hispanic/Latino and about 3% are Asian. 33% represent a single, millennial and younger group of people that are highly integrated into technology, are working at their first or second job, and are generally skeptical of all institutions. So one third of your neighbors would likely find no reason to visit a local church –what is here for them but an institution that, like so many others, has let the world down? They wouldn't know what to do with our whole 'lets stand and sing' thing in worship – they only do this at a karaoke bar! Liturgy, someone preaching – all foreign to someone who isn't interested. At least 1/3 of the neighborhood isn't buying what the church is selling.

Have you ever walked into a store or business and immediately thought "This place isn't for me"? The lights, the music, the smells, the way you are greeted – you are either 'in' to what they are offering, or you aren't. Hip hop music or classical music? Which would greet you better? Strong smells or antiseptic no-smells – which is more inviting to you? This same demographic data is often used to make choices like this for businesses who are targeting just one niche market – our Urban Edge folks- that one third we were talking about – would probably like things different than those of us who were born and raised on Amazing Grace and Vacation Bible School.

But we in the church – we are called to welcome everyone. Its right here in the Bible, and its in your mission and values statements, "our call as a community is to not be homogeneous – as the body of Christ in Alexandria, we are called to be a reflection of our community"

Which leads us to Paul. Paul can help with this in our scripture this morning. Remember, Paul is someone who has persecuted Christ, held the coats of those stoning Stephen to death. Now, after an incident in which the Risen Christ literally knocks him off his horse to knock some sense into him, he finds himself preaching the good news to everyone! His good news – You are a beloved child of God! Look what God can and did do through Jesus! And it doesn't matter if you are a Jew, or a Gentile. It

doesn't matter if you are poor or rich, speak Aramaic, Greek or Hebrew; whether you are a Roman or a slave. All meant all! Paul didn't only welcome – he sought them out. He'd start with a synagogue if the town had one, and convince any Jews he could that their Messiah had come. That often didn't go well, because it involved saying, "... and the priests and scribes of the temple arranged to have the Messiah killed", and Paul often found himself being stoned and chased out of town. But he didn't give up – he'd go down to the rivers and meet with the women, or into the town center where Gentiles were meeting and discussing philosophy. He'd set up his tent making business and spread the good news any way he could.

Paul's statement – I become all things to all people for the sake of saving some – what does that mean for us today? What can his example show us about the value this church holds for Welcome?

Like Paul, we have each been given great gifts. Hopefully we didn't have to be knocked off a horse to figure out what to do with those gifts! He had his tent making business, and he had his ability to argue and teach. Some of you here are business people, some may be lawyers or people who work for the government. You may be retired; you may be a homemaker. ALL of you have been given enough gifts to welcome the next person, and the next person, that comes in from your surrounding community. I truly believe, and have yet to be proven wrong in the work of revitalization that I do – that God gives each church, each representation of Christ in a particular neighborhood – everything it needs in order to reach the next person God is preparing to seek a community. Everything is already here. What is not always here is our willingness to activate our gifts and talents and experiences. We are more comfortable sitting on them in our pews, staying in the known and safe spaces, rather than extending the reach of our gifts outward from this building.

When I was an attorney, I was told in a Bible Study class that my gifts and talents were given by God – which kind of annoyed me – didn't I work full time and go to law school at night? Wasn't that just me working really hard to accomplish something? Yes...and no. It wasn't mine alone. The strength to do that was with God's help, and God's call on my gifts to reach out to the next person is always on those gifts. This perspective changed how I viewed my clients, and how I worked with my church. When it wasn't all about me and mine, my view of what I could do changed.

As I said earlier – over a third of your neighborhood is unchurched people that don't see much use in church. And yet, God has assured us that in this entire church, there are enough gifts to welcome many new people you don't know today. It may not be to this building – it may be into your home, or in your office, or in your gym, or in your favorite restaurant – there are ways and gifts that welcome can be offered, and people can be embraced as the next person who will find out that they too are a Beloved Child of God. What are your gifts God has already given you? How could they be used, like Paul's gifts, to share the good news? How could they be used to connect to people, to welcome people, to nurture relationships and groups and communities in ways God desires? Can you picture the welcome it would take to be a real presence in your neighborhood? God can picture it. And Paul can model it. But the work that remains is for you and this church to engage your gifts and go forth with the good news.