

SERMON  
June 29, 2008  
“A welcoming church”  
By the Rev. Bill Fulton

When I'm traveling on a weekend, I always visit the Episcopal Church near me. I'm curious about how they worship, about the inside of the church, about what the clergy are like, and I know I'll be enlightened by my visit. So I always look forward to going to a new church.

But – I find it very difficult to actually enter a strange church. Almost always, as I get near the church door, I begin to get nervous. Am I here at the right time? Am I dressed right? Where should I sit? What kind of people go to church here, and will feel awkward here? What if I do something embarrassing because I don't know the customs here?

So I find it very difficult to go to a new church. And it occurs to me that if I, a clergy person, find it difficult to go to a new Episcopal Church, how much more difficult must it be for strangers to walk up to the door of an Episcopal Church? I think it takes a lot of bravery to go to a strange church, and we ought to respect those who do it!

Let me tell you a story of one of the first times Katy and I went to a church. It was in a small town in Petersburg, Alaska, on an island. Petersburg is the name of the town. Katy and I had just gotten engaged, and we had been to the Episcopal Church there maybe once or twice. Of course in a small town when you announce you're going to get married, everyone knows about it. At any rate, the people in the church invited us to a picnic at the church cabin across the bay, on the next island.

We thought we might go, and we started out in my small boat with an outboard motor. We got about halfway there, and I got cold feet. I said, “Do we really want to go to this picnic?” Katy said it was up to me to decide. So I put the boat in a big circle while we talked about it. While we went in circles, I talked about how I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend the whole afternoon with a bunch of church people, it would probably be boring, and so on. Of course, the real reason was that I was nervous, but I wouldn't admit that.

Finally we decided we'd go, so I straightened out the boat and we finished the journey. We tied up the boat and walked up the dock to the cabin, and when we opened the door, they all said, “Congratulations on getting engaged!” It was a wedding shower for us, put on by the whole church!

What I remember about was looking around the room at these people who were sitting there with presents on their laps, all smiling at us, and I felt such love from them. We were truly welcomed into that church community. And that was the beginning of my participation in the life of that church.

We were welcomed. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Jesus is talking about welcoming because it's such an important part of being a Christian. When we welcome God into our heart, we open ourselves to the power of God and we are blessed. So Jesus is talking to the people about how to welcome God. He says, "When you welcome someone who comes in my name, then you're welcoming me. And when you welcoming me, you're welcoming God."

So when someone comes to St. Antony's, they're coming in the name of God, and when we welcome them, we welcome God.

In Romans 15, Paul puts it this way: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ welcomed you."

When we first pulled up to our new house in our U-haul van, we were met with a very enthusiastic crowd of people to welcome us and help unload the U-Haul truck. We felt very welcomed, and I knew right then that St. Antony's is a welcoming church. We welcome everyone who comes to our doors.

What does it mean to welcome someone? It means to let down our barriers to them. When we welcome God, we let down our barriers to God. What barriers do we have to God? Fear, guilt, uncertainty, unworthiness, pride, to name a few. To welcome God means to open our hearts to God.

When we welcome someone into our church, we let down our barriers to them. We accept them without judging them.

Recently I read a book called the Inviting Church. It talked about how we can welcome people to our church, and it asked a number of questions. How easy is it to find your church? Is it in the phone book? Does it have a website with directions? How about the phone message? Is it inviting? When someone shows up, is there a place to park? Can they find the front door? Is there someone to greet them, and how welcoming is the greeting? Is the service easy to follow? Do they know what to do? And after the service, are they welcomed and invited to coffee?

Last Tuesday I was at a Bible study with the local Lutheran clergy. I enjoyed them very much, and Bill Crabtree, the local pastor, said he recently spoke at the funeral of a woman named Happy Scott. During his sermon, he said she was named Happy from childhood (I guess she was a happy kid!). She had been at their church for many years, and she always made it a practice of greeting people when they came in on Sunday morning. He said she was just so happy that people were coming to her church, it was natural for her to greet them.

After his sermon, a number of people got up to speak. Quite a few of them said the same thing: "I became a member of this church because of Happy Scott and the way she greeted us when we came that first Sunday morning."

I hope that we will be as welcoming as Happy Scott, and I hope that we will always be a welcoming church. We welcome all who come to this church in the name of God, and as we welcome them, we welcome Christ himself.