

Rector's Corner

Making Room

You've probably heard jokes and stories about longtime Episcopalians getting upset about arriving at church only to find newcomers sitting in "their" pew. While there's nothing wrong with having a preferred spot, like many jokes, this one contains an uncomfortable element of truth.

Most Episcopalians and Episcopal churches talk about how welcoming they are, and welcoming the stranger is not just polite, but a Biblical virtue. But we don't always realize how radical and challenging the notion of welcome is. Welcome, done properly, is hard, because the whole point is to welcome people who don't fit in, who for whatever reason are difficult to welcome.

There's always a reason to deem someone an "outsider," unworthy of welcome. Race, class, and politics divide us in the secular world, and people don't become immune to these tendencies when they come to church. To our shame, we find even more reasons to reject and criticize our fellow Christians, as differences of style, opinion, and personality get blown out of proportion.

Jesus didn't just pray that all his followers "might be one," and didn't just teach parables like the Good Samaritan, which dramatically shows someone who would have been the ultimate outsider to be the hero of the story, he also made a point to minister to and share fellowship with people who had been rejected from his society – rejected often for much better reasons than we reject people – and caught criticism for doing so.

One of the things I love about being an Episcopalian is the diversity that exists within our church, and the even greater diversity in the worldwide Anglican Communion. We are a big tent, and while there's nothing wrong with valuing own identity and preferences, we should remember – and celebrate – that you can find pretty much any combination of race, class, politics, style, opinion, and personality in at least one Episcopalian. And while some good-natured teasing can be a fun, occasional addition to our fellowship, it's more important to remember that all of us are worthy of acceptance, respect, and Christian love. When we devalue others, we diminish ourselves because we deny the truth that they, like us, are made in the image of God.

When new people want to worship with us, we should make room for them, not just in our pews, but also in our hearts and minds, with joy and gratitude that God has sent them to us. Telling someone they are welcome, so long as they think and act exactly the way we personally prefer, is no welcome at all. But when we embrace new people – embrace them as they are,

not as an opportunity to tailor them to our preferences – we welcome not just them, but Jesus who sent them, the one in whom we all in our beautiful diversity find our unity, our identity, and our home.

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