

Exploring Progressive Christianity 3

Luke 14: 12-14

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As you know, our dog, Porter, occupies a lot of my free time. John and I take him to the ARF dog park often. I may enjoy it as much as Porter does. I love watching him run at full speed, chase his friends, and interact with the other dog parents. He is very popular with the other dogs and the humans. If you know Porter, you know why. He is a lover. We can learn a lot from dogs. At the dog park, the dogs stop whatever they are doing, whether running, playing in the creek or the water feature, whatever it is, they will stop when a new dog approaches the park gate. All the dogs race to the gate to welcome and get to know the newbie. There is never a moment when the new dog is left to wonder if the other dogs want him or her there. They are always welcomed exuberantly. We could learn from that.

Feeling unwelcome is not a pleasant feeling. I would guess we've all felt that way from time to time. Have you ever walked into a room and the people stopped talking? And then someone made it worse by saying, "I'll tell you later." Have you found out you were excluded from an important conversation at work? Have you driven by your friend's house, seen other friends' cars there, and wondered what they were doing together without you? Have you filled out a form that assumed families like yours didn't exist? Exclusion, in whatever form, hurts.

And I think it hurts the most when we feel unwelcome in places that tout how welcoming they are...places like churches. I've had the privilege of listening to some of you talk about how it felt to be unwelcome in other churches. Your family wasn't recognized as a family. You asked too many questions. Your theology didn't match the pastor's. You fell in love with the wrong person. You didn't look how they thought you should look. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. And I've also listened when you've shared that something here has made you feel unwelcome. Someone talked over you in a meeting. I said something in a sermon that made you feel like maybe you didn't belong. You have tried to make friends, but it hasn't come easily. Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

This week, I read a story in Outreach Magazine, a resource for ministers, that suggested that if a minister serves a church that markets itself as the friendliest church in town, that marketing strategy should be changed immediately. The author said undoubtedly there is someone in town who would report that they felt unwelcome when they attended your church. As I reflected on this and considered the Core Value we are focusing on today, my heart hurt and I knew we needed to talk about it, especially in this season when it seems the whole world is looking for reasons to be divided. We just don't always get it right.

For the past two weeks, we have talked about inclusion relative to theology and individual belief systems. Today's Progressive Christianity Core Value addresses the other reasons people have historically been excluded. So far in this series, we have answered the questions: Why do we follow the ways of Jesus? AND Is there wisdom from teachers other than Jesus? Today we will answer the question: Who is ALL? When we say, all are welcome, who is that really?

This is Core Value #3: Progressive Christians:

Seek and create community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:

Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,

Believers and agnostics,

Women and men,

Those of all races, cultures, and nationalities

Those of all sexual orientations and all gender identities,

Those of all classes and abilities;

All creatures and plant life;

My guess is that there isn't anyone in this room who would take issue with welcoming any of the groups on this list. Our call to worship this morning, which I have used before, celebrated this kind of inclusive welcome. This is not to say that we don't constantly need to be looking for ways to welcome even more broadly, but generally, when it comes to this list, we are attentive to the specific ways we welcome the dear ones in these groups and we are quick to correct ourselves when something goes wrong.

But what about the people we just don't like? How do we welcome the ones who irritate us? The ones who post things on social media that we swear are about us? The ones whose posts seem deliberately divisive or that include biting sarcasm? What about the ones who have treated our friends badly, the ones who haven't been good friends to us? How are we supposed to welcome them? Can't we just have a special church for those people?

²⁷ "...I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; ²⁸ bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in

return.^[a] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as God is merciful. ³⁷ "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." ⁹ He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰ A disciple is not above the teacher, but every disciple who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. ⁴¹ Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴² Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

That was Luke 6:27-42. In this passage, Jesus was speaking to a large group of his followers. This text is a mixture of teachings. Scholars agree that some of the ideas originated with Jesus and some originated with the author of Luke.

I think it is enlightening for us to see that parsed out, so in your bulletin, there is an insert with today's text printed on it. The bolded phrases likely originated with Jesus:

Love your enemies.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who asks of you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?

...love your enemies...

Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Jesus was pretty concise. His message about how to treat people was clear and his idea of ALL is everyone.

Before I unpack this a little, I want to be clear...it was not Jesus' intent, nor is it mine, to encourage anyone to put themselves in unhealthy situations. If someone has physically hurt you or your relationship with that person has been abusive or unsafe,

this is not a call to put yourself right back in and invite them to church. Your well-being is important to me. I take the safety of everyone in this congregation very seriously.

And also, I am aware that there is a societal trend to redefine words like traumatic and unsafe and apply them to situations that are hard or very uncomfortable. So, I will ask you to try to sit with the discomfort and consider this sermon an invitation to spiritual growth that will require some spiritual and mental discipline. And I will tell you that if what I say this morning makes you squirm a little in your seat, know that I am feeling that too. This sermon is not pointed at one person or five people. It is pointed at all of us, including me. Every good preacher will say that we preach what we (ourselves) need to hear and that is true for me today (whether you think I'm a good preacher or not).

I, too, need to be reminded that as a follower of Jesus, I am called to create a safe community for and with people who are a lot of fun and who are easy to work with, and people I don't enjoy spending time with. I would like you to know that just because I am a minister doesn't mean I automatically like absolutely everyone. And I am under no illusion that everyone likes me. Jesus' idea of inclusion is not about that. It is not a warm and fuzzy feel-good concept. It is, as I say before we bring in the light at the beginning of the service, life-changing and life-saving. Real inclusion is hard. It is uncomfortable. It requires mental toughness and discipline. But when we commit to practicing it, to allowing ourselves to be uncomfortable sometimes, we grow. When we practice loving people, we grow into better lovers.

That's the GROW part of WELCOME, GROW, SERVE.

Several years ago, a fella visited this church for the first time. He was experiencing a really rough season in life and was looking for a soft place to land. I was a little surprised to see this guy here because I had interacted with his partner previously (they weren't married at the time) and I knew his partner and I did not click. Every time I saw him in the community, he gave off a very "you are not my favorite person vibe." Anyway, a couple of weeks later, this fella came back to worship and his partner was with him. When they walked in the door, I was instantly freaked out. I was super uncomfortable and secretly hoped something would happen and the two would decide this was not the place to worship. How is that for a confession? I am grateful that the best version of myself showed up that day. This couple are beloved members of this church today. And I cannot imagine my life without them in it. I cannot imagine this church without them being part of it.

That's how I want to be every day, even when I encounter people who are difficult for me to be close to. I want to be able to be uncomfortable and still be kind. I want hard situations to bring out the best in me and not the worst. I want to be able to admit that am the problem. Because I am. If I am unable to be kind, I am the problem. As this

sermon was percolating in my mind this week, I attended the United Way Campaign kick-off on Thursday. As always, I was so impressed with my friend Lisa Cary. Lisa is the CEO of the Bartlesville Regional United Way and if you haven't met her, I recommend it.

In her speech, she said that our lives have two dates: the day we were born and the day we die. We know one of them and we don't know the other. She reminded us that what we are living now is the dash between the dates. She asked us to reflect on how we are each living out our dash. I'd like to ask you the same question. How are you living out your dash? Is your life about what you want it to be about?

I don't know about you, but I have a little voice in my head that keeps me fearful that my failures will define my dash. I sure hope not. You see, I want my dash to be about following the ways of Jesus, creating the kind of world he talked about. Today's text has always given me a little bit of a stomachache though. Because these are hard things. And because I don't always get them right. I make mistakes all the time. I use the wrong pronouns, even when I know better. And then I center myself with repeated apologies. I reply to something on social media when I'm in a hurry instead of taking time to think about what I want to say. I forget that part of loving people is letting them know I value their contributions. A church member shared with me a few months ago that I hurt her feelings when I told her I didn't need her help with something because Anna was doing it. My words sounded to her like I didn't value her or her gifts. I get it wrong more often than I would like. And, like toothpaste that has been squeezed out of the tube, we can't take the words back once they are out there.

I wonder, do you get it wrong sometimes too? Are there times when your dash doesn't reflect your desire to follow the ways of Jesus? You know, churches are full of people who want to follow Jesus but get it wrong sometimes. They/we are not bad people. Every church I have ever been part of as a child, a teen, or an adult, has had a problem, to one degree or another, with cliques. I've asked colleagues if their churches struggle with cliques and the answer has been yes. I have talked to people who aren't interested in church tell me that their impression of churches is that they are like country clubs, some people are in and some are out. That is largely why they don't want to be part of a church. A clique is a small group of people, with shared interests or other things in common, who spend time together and do not readily allow others to join them. In other words, it is a small group of people who make others feel unwelcome.

It is easy for cliques to form in churches because, within any large group, people naturally gravitate toward people with whom they have something in common. Churches tend to group people that way on purpose, to build community. There isn't anything wrong with that until the group stops being a safe, welcoming place for new people. In a lot of churches, the cliquishness shows up in youth groups, so I will use

my experience as a youth minister to talk about it. It seems safer, right, to talk about this in terms of teenagers.

At the Presbyterian Church I served, the youth group was a really close-knit group. They didn't go to the same high school, they lived in many different parts of town, and they had a lot of different interests, but in that youth group, they found a safe space to bring their problems, their questions, and their celebrations. They had a lot of fun together and did a lot of great stuff for the church and the community. It was magical. Until it wasn't.

One September, I noticed that the upperclassmen weren't doing a good job of integrating the freshmen into the group. At about the same time, we had a couple of new families in the church and their teens visited the youth group. I watched as these kids I loved made no effort to include the visitors or the younger youth. They would make inside jokes that new people didn't understand. They would text each other from across the room and laugh. At first, I thought it was just a rough start to the school year. But it went on. The freshmen didn't want to come, and I didn't blame them. They wanted to go back to the junior high youth group. Visitors came once and never came again. I wondered if I was making a bigger deal out of it than it warranted. And then one parent took the time to email me to tell me her child felt unwelcome. I was crushed.

I had to address it, so I asked the junior high leaders to come up with a reason to invite the freshman back to the junior high youth group one evening, so I could talk to the rest of the youth group. At youth group, I told the teens I hoped they could help a colleague of mine solve a problem he was having in his youth group. They were eager to help. I told them a parent had emailed him and said their child had come to youth group the week before and had felt really unwelcome. Her child felt out of place, nobody talked to her, and she was sure they were making fun of her among themselves. I told my youth group that my colleague wanted to know what he should do to get his youth group back on track.

Immediately, the youth were horrified that the other group had acted like that. They talked about what that youth group should do differently and even suggested they go undercover to visit the group and see this for themselves. In the middle of their fervor to fix the problem and their righteous indignation, I said, "Friends, that colleague is me. I am the one who received the email. You are the group that was unwelcoming." You could have heard a pin drop in the room. The students were very uncomfortable. It was hard to hear and, honestly, hard for me to say.

I wish this only happened with teens. I wish we outgrew it. You see, practicing the kind of inclusion and welcome Jesus called us to is not easy. It would be super easy to create community with only the people we like and with only the people who are like us. If creating community with all kinds of people was easy, there wouldn't be so many

churches. It isn't easy because we don't like to be uncomfortable. We lead with pride sometimes and forget about humility. But following Jesus isn't supposed to be easy or comfortable. It is supposed to change us...it is supposed to change the world. And the world needs to change. Bartlesville needs to change.

Bartlesville is full of people who have felt unwelcome in other churches. DCC has to be a place where everyone who seeks to love and be loved is welcome. And that will include people who irritate you. It will include people who have posted things on social media you don't agree with or like. It will include people you have heard rumors about and if the rumors are true, you don't like them. It will include people who have been rude to you or your friends. It will include people you have been rude to.

But the community we are trying to create is too important to let personalities, discomfort, and perceived moral high ground derail it. If I, and all my failures, are welcome here, and you and all your failures are welcome here, then the ones whose failures we have delighted in highlighting are welcome here too. Let us be people who remove the logs from our own eyes so that we can see our neighbors through the unencumbered eyes of love.

Let our dashes be symbolized by hearts.

Let us be a little more like Porter and his friends at the dog park, delighting in welcoming and getting to know everyone. Let us put out the welcome mat and love the people who want to be loved. It won't be comfortable, but it will be beautiful. Amen.