

All Are Welcome Sermon on Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

"All are welcome." We just sang those words together as our opening Hymn today. *All are welcome*. It is a beautiful hymn. It paints a picture of a church with open doors. A community where people find belonging. A place where people are received and accepted. And yet, if I am honest, those words sometimes make me a little uncomfortable. "All are welcome." And I am wondering and asking my self. Really? Do I really welcome everybody? Do we truly mean everyone? The person who comes to worship intoxicated? The person who is loud and disruptive? The person whose political views we find difficult to understand or accept? The person who has hurt us? The person who makes us uneasy? It is easy to say, "All are welcome," when we are thinking about people who are easy to like. It becomes much harder when we think about people who challenge us. And that is exactly where we meet Jesus in today's Gospel. Jesus passes by a tax collector named Matthew. To many people in his day, Matthew was a traitor, a cheat, someone to be avoided. But Jesus looks at him and says, "Follow me."

And Matthew gets up and follows him. Soon afterward, Jesus is sitting at a table with tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders are shocked. „Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?“ And Jesus answers, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Jesus does not wait for people to get their lives together. He does not wait for them to become perfect. He meets them where they are. He invites them to the table. He sees them. He loves them.

And that is exactly what gets him into trouble. Because Jesus' table is larger than people expect. His love reaches farther than the boundaries others draw. His invitation extends to people whom many have already written off. Now we might say, "Then we should simply do what Jesus did."

Yesterday evening as I was dancing we talked about the sentence „love your neighbour like yourself“ and somebody said it is acutally very easy. And I said. No I don't think so. It sounds easy but in reality it is not. This is where we need to be honest. We are not Jesus. We are human beings. We are sinners. Even we who are the church. We have prejudices/bias. We have fears. We make judgments too quickly. We draw lines. Jesus, however, is not merely a good person or a moral example. Jesus is God among us. That is why he can see and love people in a way that we cannot. That is why he sees a disciple in Matthew where others see only a sinner. That is why he sees hope where others have given up. So when we say, "All are welcome," we are not describing something we have already mastered. Instead, it is a direction. A goal. Perhaps even a prayer.

Lord, help us see people as you see them. Lord, open our hearts a little wider. Lord, teach us to look at others through your eyes. Because we will never love as perfectly as Jesus loves. But we can learn from him.

We can follow him. We can take one more step toward people we might otherwise avoid.

Last week we heard the creation story as our first reading. There we are told that human beings are created in the image of God. *We theologians call it „Imago Dei.“ – the image of God* Every person bears something of God's image. Every person, indeed.

The successful business owner and the person without a home. The respected citizen and the struggling addict. The person we naturally like and the person who challenges us.

Perhaps that is an important reminder for our time. We live in a world that loves to divide people into groups. Us and them. Those who belong and those who do not. But before we are anything else, we are human beings. Created in the image of God. And we all stand on the same ground before God. Martin Luther expressed this truth with a famous phrase: *Simul iustus et peccator*. At the same time saint and sinner. That is true of every person in this room. Of people who are like us. And of people who are different from us. Of people of every sexual orientation, every political conviction, every background, every life story.

None of us stands before God because of our achievements. None of us is loved because we have done everything right. And none of us stands outside the reach of God's grace.

Before God, our differences are not what define us. Before God, we are God's beloved creation. People who need grace. People who have been invited by Christ.

That is why I am grateful for the ministries of this congregation. When we serve coffee through our mobile coffee. When people receive care through our dental clinic. When we create opportunities for people who might otherwise be overlooked. We are doing more than serving meals. More than providing dental care. More than offering social services. We are saying to people: You are seen. You matter. You are loved by God. There is a place for you at God's table. We are trying to make visible something of the hospitality of Jesus.

Not perfectly. But faithfully. Not without mistakes. But sincerely. Not as people who have it all figured out. But as people who ourselves live by grace.

And this is why I changed our hymn off he day to „built a longer table“ Not a higher wall. We don't need a tighter circle. Not more barriers. But we need to build a longer table. A table where more people can find a place. A table that reflects something of the heart of God.

Of course, that does not mean that everything is acceptable. Communities need boundaries. People need protection. Welcoming people does not mean approving every action.

But welcoming people does mean refusing to give up on them. It means seeing more than a person's mistakes. It means trusting that God may still see possibilities where we see none.

And perhaps the Gospel begins right there. Not with us welcoming others. But with God welcoming us. We are not here today because we have done everything right. Not because we are better than anyone else. Not because we are the good people. We are here because Jesus called us too. He also said to us, "Follow me." We all live by the same grace. We all sit at the same table. We have all received the same invitation. And therefore we are free to invite others. Not perfectly. Not as Jesus does. Because we are human, and we are sinners. But in his footsteps. With his help. And trusting that God's table is always bigger than our imagination. So, with the help of God, let's built a longer table
Amen.