

## Who We Are: Belong

Over the next three Sunday's we're going to be looking in depth at our new mission statement: "We are an open Christian community for all to belong, grow, and engage the world in acts of service and justice," that we solidified back in the Spring.

After a year and half process, with 9 different listening sessions, countless conversations with stakeholders in the wider community, and a ½ day retreat, this congregation unanimously voted on our new mission statement.

"We are an open Christian community for all to belong, grow, and engage the world in acts of service and justice."

To further clarify that mission, we landed on three core priorities that will help us live into that mission centered around the words belong, grow, engage. Over the next three weeks, we are going to take a deeper look at this mission by focusing on one of our core priorities. This week, we are looking at Belong. Specifically, what does it mean to say we are a church where all can belong.

So let's try something for a minute. I'm going to offer a few different greetings to you and I want you to just pay attention to what you are feeling when I say each one of these:

"No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

"All are welcome here, including wigglers, squirmers, gigglers, and can't sit stillers. If you'd like, we have some fidgets and some children's book in the narthex so please feel free to get up anytime to grab one."

"Hi, my name is R.G. and my pronouns are he and him. Please know that whatever your gender identity or expression, you are welcome and accepted here for who you are."

"Welcome to FCC Milton. Wherever you are on your faith journey. If you find yourself full of faith or filled with doubts, you are welcome here."

"Welcome to FCC Milton. In the narthex, we have both hearing aids or sound cancelling ear plugs. Please know that people of any age or ability are welcome here."

"We are a community that celebrates difference. People of all races, genders, sexualities, beliefs, and perspectives are welcome here. We are stronger because of our diversity."

Ok, how are we doing. I wonder if some of you may have resonated with one of those statements more than others. I wonder if some of you might be asking, why don't we just say, "All are welcome here." Doesn't that cover it?

It's a good question. On the one hand to say, "All are welcome here," succinctly sums up all of the other, longer welcomes I offered. But here's the thing, far too often, and I think often

unintentionally, what generic statements like “All are welcome here,” really mean is that all are welcome here if they do things the way we do them, and act the way we act, if we don’t have to really go out of our way to do the things that would actually make someone feel like they belong.

In my last church I served in Birmingham, Sam and Rebecca were long time members. They were successful in their careers. They had two awesome daughters. And church was their community. It’s where they met all of their close friends. And for most of their time in that church, the “all are welcome” was all they needed.

But then everything changed.

In his late 50s, Sam was diagnosed with early onset dementia. He could no longer work and it wasn’t long before he couldn’t be left alone. All of a sudden what Rebecca needed to feel like she belonged changed a whole lot.

She sang in the church choir but she could no longer do that if she had to sit with Sam to make sure he was ok. But one of their church friends said, “Rebecca, you keep singing. I’ll sit with Sam every week.”

When Sam’s dementia progressed to the point that he might call out during worship, Sam and Rebecca’s friends quietly shared what was going on with others in the community so they wouldn’t turn and stare.

When Sam got up to wander around, a good friend always walked with him to make sure he was safe and that he wasn’t alone.

You see, the message could have just been a generic, “All are welcome. Rebecca and Sam, you belong here.” But belonging looked a lot different for them after Sam was diagnosed with alzheimers. To truly belong then, it had to be more than words. It had to be someone willing to do what was necessary for Rebecca to still sing in the choir, to accept that Sam might not be able to sit quietly through the service, to get up and take a walk during the sermon with him if he needed to. It meant not helping him leave the space unless he wanted to.

What I learned from Sam and Rebecca’s experience is for a church to say we are a community where all can belong is not just a slogan, but rather it is a commitment that we will do whatever tangible acts we can to help everyone belong.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing this same issue – how to help everyone feel like they belong in church. One of the big debates in the early church was whether or not Christians could eat food that had been slaughtered as a sacrifice to pagan deities. It was common in Greco Roman festivals to offer a sacrifice to the gods and then to eat the food that had been sacrificed as part of a festival. But Jews and Christians weren’t so sure this was ok.

Some said, “Absolutely not. We will have nothing to do with food that is associated with pagan worship. We won’t eat.”

But Paul preached a gospel of freedom. He preached that it is God's grace that ultimately matters, and that our response to that grace is faith – it's trusting in God and in God's love for us. For Paul, that means whether we eat food sacrificed to idols or not doesn't really matter. So if you want to eat, go ahead and eat.

But then Paul gives one caveat. If eating in this way offends someone, if it makes someone feel uncomfortable, if it makes someone feel like they don't belong, then why in the world would we want to hurt someone else just to enjoy our freedom of eating. This is what he says:

“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who considers it unclean. <sup>15</sup> If your brother or sister is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.”

Do you see how Paul wants to move from debating an issue to focusing on loving people. The issue is whether or not you can eat food that had been offered to an idol. Paul says, “Sure. No problem.” As long as the conversation is about an issue, then Paul comes down on the side of freedom – do what you want.

But the moment the issue is not just an issue but is about a person, Paul says we have to come down on the side of love. It's not about being right or wrong. It's about how can we love our neighbor. If not eating food that offends someone can be an act of love, then why shouldn't we practice that.

Now I know eating food sacrificed to idols is not our issue. But I think the principal behind Paul's words is profoundly important when we're thinking about how we can be a community for all to belong. Because you see, when the conversation is about abstract issues, we can argue and debate about who's right and who's wrong. But for Paul, that's not the conversation we should be having. Rather the conversation should be about humans beings, children of God. When we focus on people, it doesn't matter nearly as much about being right. What matters is how we can tangibly love each other

To be a community where all can belong, I think, starts with that commitment – we want to do all we can to love whoever comes through our door. Love is more important than being right. Love is more important than doing things the way we've always done it. Love is more important than understanding every single thing we say or do. To be a community that prioritizes love above all else is how we can be a community where all can belong.

But I know that's easier said than done. Being a community of belonging is always a work in progress. If we are open, we will constantly learn things we can do better or different to help somebody feel like they belong a little more. That's why we have a Belong Box in the narthex. You can help us be a more inclusive, more loving community by telling us what would help you feel a greater sense of belonging.

Friends, our mission statement is both descriptive and aspirational. It describes who we are. We are a church where people feel like they belong. So many of you have stories of how loved you

feel and have felt in this community. But it's also aspirational. We know that have more work to do.

So friends, today on this Welcome Sunday, I want to offer you one invitation and one challenge. First, the invitation -- please know that I am so glad that each and every one of you are here. This church has affirmed that our first priority is to make sure that every one of you feels like you belong here.

You belong here.

And now for the challenge. Anytime we do something or say something and for whatever reason you feel uncomfortable or you may wonder, "that doesn't apply to me," or you may think that's not how we used to do things, stop and take a breath. And don't first ask yourself, "Is this right or wrong?" Rather ask yourself, "Is this helping you feel a little more loved? Is this helping your neighbor feel like they belong a little more?"

That's the question we have to keep asking ourselves. Because I can promise you, if we choose to radically lean into love, then the question of right or wrong will take care of itself.

So welcome to First Congregational Church, Milton. "We are an open Christian community for all to belong, grow, and engage the world in acts of service and justice." And you belong here.