

Love is Welcoming

Rich Nathan

April 28 & 29, 2018

Love is More than a Feeling

Romans 14:1-12

I read a wonderful story about a 16-year old girl who developed an app called “Sit with us”. The developer is an 11th grader named Natalie Hampton from California.

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Natalie’s picture

She was interviewed on NPR and here’s what she said:

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“In my old school, I was completely ostracized by all my classmates, and so I had to eat lunch alone every day. When you walk into the lunchroom and you see all the tables of everyone sitting there and you know that going up to them would only end in rejection, you feel extremely alone and extremely isolated, and your stomach drops. And you are searching for a place to eat, but you know if you sit by yourself, there’ll be so much embarrassment that comes with it because people will know and they’ll see you as the girl who has nowhere to sit. So there’s so many awful feelings that come with it.”

So the way the app works is it’s a pre-lunch planning app. Kids can find lunch tables if they feel like they have no place else to go. And other kids are ambassadors for the “Sit with us” app. They welcome any kid who wants to sit at the lunch table with them.

One of my dearest friends has a beautiful middle school son named Luke who loves the Lord and he has high-functioning autism. Like every autistic kid, he has a little bit of social communication impairment which isolates him from his peers. His so-called friends make fun of him and they get him to do things that they can then laugh at. Lots of autistic kids when they are asked, “Who did you eat lunch with?” that day, they mumble, “I don’t know.”

Teachers can make a huge difference in creating an atmosphere of welcome at their local schools. Some schools have organized “lunch bunches” where a teacher or a school therapist will gather a group of kids who may be sitting by themselves at opposite ends of the cafeteria. Sometimes they’ll just create a safe place of sanctuary at lunch tables for autistic kids and typical kids to sit at. But the lunch bunches will have a special ed teacher, a school therapist there, to guide the conversation at the table and to include all kinds of kids so that they feel welcome in the school.

Sometimes, being welcoming involves an incredible, almost heroic, sacrifice. A little less than a year ago, six Ohio foster siblings found themselves a home – together without being broken up. That in itself is profound that someone welcomed in six siblings. The fact that the siblings are white and their adoptive family is black – with five children of their own – is almost unprecedented. The judge in the case said that as long as he’s been on the bench doing family law, he’s never seen six siblings adopted by one family.

Here’s a picture of the family:

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Picture

The Cincinnati parents, Christopher and Christina Sanders, said that when they opened their home to foster children, they made a deal. They said, “Whoever we got, we would not break them up from their siblings and we’d keep them and not send them to separate houses.”

I’ve been doing a series that I titled, “Love is More than a Feeling”. Typically, when you ask a person to define the word “love” they’ll say something like, “Well, love is a feeling that...” But in the Bible, love is almost never described as a feeling. Instead, love is a chosen action. It’s a choice to not be irritable, to be forgiving, to be patient. Today, I want to talk about the choice of love to be welcoming. I’ve titled today’s talk, “Love is Welcoming”. Let’s pray.

Have you ever been in a situation where you knew you were not welcome? You’re the second wife, the stepmom, and the husband’s son is graduating from high school or your husband’s daughter is getting married? And you are absolutely treated like a leper by the ex-wife, by her whole family and friendship circle, maybe even by the children. You know you’re not welcome there. This often happens in blended families on important occasions and celebrations. There’s definitely a reality to the old saying that you cannot get a permanent divorce, especially if you have children. The other person is always going to be part of your children’s lives. They’re always going to be there at key moments, during family crises and even at the birth of your grandchildren.

As a pastor who has done a lot of weddings over the years, I’ve had to negotiate through those awkward moments at weddings when it was very clear that a stepfather or stepmother was not welcome by a lot of people who were attending the wedding.

Have you ever been in a situation where you weren’t welcome? Maybe you were involved in an interracial dating situation and your date’s parents made it very clear that they didn’t want you or what you represented, your kind dating their son or daughter.

The situation of people rejecting others who are different than them is not a new phenomenon. We read about it throughout the Bible. Here's what we read in Romans:

Slide Romans 14:1-12

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ²One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.'”

¹²So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

I want to begin with:

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The breakdown of welcome

The Apostle Paul says there's a dispute going on between those who are strong in faith and those who are weak in faith. What's he talking about? Who are the weak and the strong? The weak were likely Jewish Christians and maybe some Gentile “God fearers” who believed they were bound by certain ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law. Those who Paul labeled as the weak in faith still believed that they needed to keep the Jewish Laws of Kashrut where people separate out what foods are considered acceptable and what foods are considered unacceptable. And they believed that they needed to keep

these ritual food laws, not as a matter of cultural preference, not as a matter of tradition, but as a requirement for pleasing God.

You could say that the weak in faith are people who feel guilty about things that are not sin. The weak in faith are similar to folks who have what the Apostle Paul calls a “weak conscience” in 1 Corinthians 8. Do you know anyone who has an overactive, condemning conscience? Who is always walking around feeling guilty about things that are not forbidden by Jesus or the New Testament writers? Those who were weak in faith said you couldn’t eat certain meat because you didn’t know how it was killed in the marketplace. Those who were strong in faith said, “Hey, we can eat anything.”

How did these Christians’ food preferences break down welcome in the church in Rome? One of the things that is very clear in this text is that:

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Welcome is broken down by legalism

There are lots of Christians in lots of churches that have not thought through the implications of the gospel and what it really means that we are acceptable before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So legalistic churches and legalistic Christians have a number of requirements that draw boundaries and lines between Christians who are supposedly serious about their faith and other Christians who supposedly care nothing about living a holy life or pleasing God. Have you ever been part of a legalistic church? Maybe you grew up in a church that had a list of rules that went beyond anything that the Lord commanded in scripture. Let me list some of the common rules of legalistic churches:

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- Women cannot wear pants
- Women cannot wear skirts that go above their ankles
- Women cannot cut their hair
- Women cannot wear jewelry
- Women cannot wear makeup
- Women cannot enter the church without their heads covered

- Women cannot expose their toes in a church building (i.e., no open-toed shoes)
- Men and women cannot watch secular/non-Christian movies
- Men and women cannot drink alcohol
- Men and women cannot listen to secular music
- Men and women cannot have non-Christian friendships
- Men and women cannot date even other Christians (because dating isn't in the Bible)
- Men cannot wear jeans in the church building (only dress pants or a suit)
- Men and women cannot read any other version of the Bible but the King James Version

If you do any of these forbidden things, you are not welcome. You're outside the circle. Have any of you ever been in a church setting like this? Welcome is broken down by legalism.

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Welcome is broken down by being opinionated

The Apostle Paul doesn't insist that everyone agree with him about food as he did in the earliest chapters regarding the way of salvation. He says in Romans 14 that the issues splitting the church were, in the words of the NIV, "disputable matters."

Slide Romans 14:1

Accept those whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.

The RSV calls them "opinions." The New English Bible calls it "doubtful points." There are many things that Christians do not have to agree about. The 16th century Protestant Reformers used to call such things "adiaphora" – matters of indifference.

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Adiaphora = Matters of Indifference

Various customs, ceremonies, religious traditions that aren't part of the gospel. Though not the author, the Puritan, Richard Baxter, famously said this:

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In essentials: Unity; In non-essentials: Liberty; In all things: Charity

The great tragedy of most church splits is they have tended to be over minor issues, non-essentials, and the church has not discussed these differences of opinion with charity, with love.

In recent years churches have split over how much water we should use in baptism. Is it enough to sprinkle a person, or must we dunk them? Should we baptize in the name of Jesus or in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Churches have split over wedding rings. Is it appropriate to give and receive a wedding ring, or is that worldly? Splits have occurred over the timing of the Lord's return and whether to support a Billy Graham Crusade or not.

Now, there are real issues that can create legitimate divisions in a church. There are some things that we ought to fight over – the divinity of Christ, the way of salvation, the doctrines in the great Creeds of the church. Roger Olson, a great theologian, wrote this in his book titled *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*:

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By dogma we are speaking about being thoroughly biblical and both faithful to the Great Tradition of Christianity as well as contemporary in its restatement of what Christians have always believed...we are valuing our common Christian heritage of belief – what will be here called the Great Tradition of Christian teaching. Other terms for the same stock of commonly held Christian beliefs include “consensual Christian tradition,” and “mere Christianity.”

Now Olson goes on to helpfully distinguish between what he calls dogma from what he calls doctrine, and what he calls opinion.

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- Dogma
- Doctrine
- Opinion

So there is **dogma**, things that form the core of Christian faith for all Christians – belief in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; belief in Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human; belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus and so on. Then there is **doctrine** – things a particular denomination may feel strongly about, but is not part of the core. We would absolutely recognize someone who believed in the core, but disagreed with our particular Vineyard doctrine as a beloved brother or sister Christian.

For example, here at Vineyard we have doctrinal convictions about the present day activity of the Holy Spirit and we welcome all the biblical gifts of the Holy Spirit. We

have a doctrinal conviction that women in the church are free to occupy any position in the church as their spiritual gifts and call permit. So, women at Vineyard Columbus are free to become church planters and pastors and elders, deacons, missionaries. We recognize that regarding our doctrines, someone may be a Christian believer but differ from us in the Vineyard over doctrinal convictions. As long as they hold on to the dogma – the core – we welcome them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, then there is opinion. Christians have opinions about lots of things – whether there is life on other planets, the age of the earth, how God created the world – things that there is no general Christian consensus about and we are not clearly taught by the Bible. Christians can and do disagree with one another about opinions.

Now what do you think most Christian fights are about in the church today? We don't fight about dogma, about the core of the Christian faith. Often our fights aren't even about doctrine, our particular denominational tradition and things that we count precious, but aren't part of the core. Often the things we fight about are opinions – our opinion about worship music preferences, our political opinions – whether you are a Republican or Democrat, a Conservative or Liberal, especially in our current political climate, our opinions regarding science, our opinions regarding child raising and breast-feeding and a million other things. And we're so dogmatic regarding our opinions that in some circles will not welcome someone into our circle who holds a different opinion than ours.

So welcome is broken down by legalism and welcome is broken down by being opinionated. Finally,

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Welcome is broken down by judgmentalism

Slide Romans 14:3

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

Slide Romans 14:10

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Slide Romans 14:13

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Have you ever wondered why the Bible condemns us judging each other? Certainly, we're supposed to exercise moral discernment. We're called upon to approve what is good and reject what is evil. Why do Jesus and the Apostle Paul tell us "Don't judge"? Don't be a judgmental person. I think there are two obvious reasons. First of all, because we tend to judge superficially.

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We tend to judge superficially

We judge people based on their skin color, their accents, their clothes, their birthplaces, their tattoos, their weight, their hair, their shoes. As followers of Jesus, we ought to resist this tendency in all of our hearts to judge people based upon appearance. Here's what Jesus taught:

Slide John 7:24

Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly."

Let me tell you a story. My granddaughter, Naomi, whom Marlene and I are raising is biracial. I love Naomi with my whole heart. She was told by a friend at the Christian school that she attends that her friend's father said they couldn't hang out together because the father said that Naomi was a "bad influence" on her daughter. When Naomi protested and said, "But your father doesn't even know me. I met him just once and I was very polite." Her friend said, "Oh, it's nothing you've done. It's the fact that you're biracial. My dad is a total racist." I'm sure Dad probably considers himself to be a Christian. When we judge people based upon their appearance without getting to know them, we are in radical disobedience of Jesus who commands us saying: "Do not judge" by mere appearance!

Not only do we tend to judge people superficially,

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We tend to judge hypocritically

Slide Matthew 7:1

Do not judge, or you too will be judged.

Matthew 7:1 is preceded by a whole chapter condemning hypocrisy. The ultimate hypocrisy is to put someone down for the very thing that we are guilty of. "I can't believe someone would gossip so much about other people. Who does she think she is?" What are you doing at that very moment? "I can't believe so-and-so committed that sexual sin." What about your sexuality? "I can't believe so-and-so dominated the conversation. They always want to be the center of attention." Why does that bother you so much? Because you wanted to be the center of attention?

Hypocritical judgment excludes others based upon the same things we have done, the same sins we have committed. Judgmentalism destroys welcome.

How is welcome built?

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The building-up of welcome

The Apostle Paul tells us that:

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Welcome is built by knowing who we are

Paul asks a rhetorical question several times in this text. Who are you?

Slide Romans 14:4a

Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

In other words, who do you think you are? You know, the Bible teaches that we, and every other human being, are made in the image of God. What does it mean to be made in the image of God? In the ancient world, a king would set up his image or statue, some kind of representation of the king wherever the king ruled. So, if the king conquered a city, the image of the king would be placed in the town square. Wherever the king's image flourished that was an indication that the kingdom was flourishing. But if people tore down the image or statue of the king, that was an indication that the people in that area were declaring war on that king.

We are made in the image of God. When we tear one another down, when we treat some people like they're not welcome in our circle, we are declaring war on the king whose image they bear. The reason that we in the Vineyard have formed the kind of church that we have is because we're seeking to live out, in a very practical way, this belief that other human beings are made in the image of God.

Vineyard wants to be a church that welcomes people regardless of who you are or what you look like. For example, for decades we have had a class called Body Builders. It's a class for teens and young adults with specific special needs (ages 14 and up). It meets at our Cooper Road campus from 9:00-10:30am on Sundays. Our church has multiple opportunities to welcome people through our English as a Second Language ministry. We serve local refugees in a variety of ways and we sponsor short-term trips to Jordan where this church ministers to people in refugee camps who are fleeing the civil war in Syria and Iraq. If you want to know more about opportunities to welcome immigrants

or to welcome refugees who are made in the image of God, you can email or call International Ministries.

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We have welcoming ministries to include deaf people in our church. We have welcoming ministries for the nearly 140 nations and ethnicities represented by Vineyard church members. The point is that welcome is built by knowing who we are, who we all are. We are all made in the image of God.

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Welcome is built by knowing who God is

Paul repeatedly tells us that God is the judge. When you grow in your relationship with God, you become more patient with God's timing and God's ability to straighten another person out. Here's what we read in Romans:

Slide Romans 14:4

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

I am convinced that one of the reasons we judge other people is that we really don't believe that God is willing or able to straighten that other person out. Our disputes and criticizing and judging of other folks are often just an indication of our lack of faith in God. What we're really saying is God, I don't think you can straighten that other person out, so I need to. I've got to do it according to my timetable; I can't wait on you.

The fact is, if we were honest and looked at our own lives, we would realize that God has always been more than able to get our attention. God may speak to you in the middle of the night when you are lying there awake. He may challenge you and me through our consciences or through a troubling dream. God can inconvenience us, or get through to us with something that happens at work, or a confrontation in our home, or a problem with our money. God can get our attention with something as little as a flat tire, or as major as a death. And if God can get our attention and straighten us out, why don't we believe that God can and will straighten out another person without our screaming and our judging? Why not turn a person with whom you are struggling over to the Lord? Let Jesus deal with them.

We can welcome others much more easily, even those whose behavior or opinions or attitudes are things we disagree with, because of who God is. We can pray to the Lord and the Lord can straighten out this other person as he chooses.

Welcome is built by knowing who we are. Welcome is built by knowing who God is.

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Welcome is built by knowing what the gospel is

The Apostle Paul, if he was anything, he was a gospel-first person. And as a gospel-first person he never just dealt with the surface issues of conflict. He always moved deeper. He understands that the issue in Romans 14 fundamentally about food was not about table fellowship, it's about gospel fellowship. What unites us together is not our political opinions; we don't all vote the same; it's not what translation of the Bible we prefer; or the worship music we prefer. What unites us together – Jew and Gentile, black and white, Asian, Hispanic, women and men, old and young, rich and poor, American and immigrant – what unites us together is the gospel. We may all have different cultural ways of expressing our faith. The unity we have is not getting one culture to bend a little bit and another culture to change this or that tradition. That's not our fundamental unity. Our fundamental unity is around Jesus.

The gospel tells us there is level ground only at the foot of the cross. We have infinitely more in common with other Christians than we have differences. We have a huge amount in common; we have shared sin in common. We are all sinners. What we have in common with each other is that we have shared lostness. We're all lost without Christ. We all fall short of the glory of God. We all stand condemned under God's wrath. We share a common way of salvation, trust in Jesus. We share common baptism in water and the Spirit, a common new identity in Christ as sons and daughters of the living God. We share together in God's family, the church. We share all together priests in God's household, bearers of the coming Kingdom.

The way that Paul addresses a lack of welcome in the church is to talk to the church about the gospel. He refuses to handle disagreements at a symptomatic surface level; he goes deep. And for Paul to go deep is to go to the gospel.

What Paul repeatedly said when he was bringing correction to his churches was: You need to work out the implications of the gospel in everything. Roman Church, you need to think through the implications of the gospel in the lunchroom. What does it mean that you and they are both Christians in terms of what you eat and how you relate to this other Christian who is uncomfortable with what they eat? What does the gospel mean for dealing with people who you disagree with about politics? What does the gospel mean in terms of getting along with people who are more conservative than you or more liberal? As we work out the implications of the gospel, what Paul is saying is stop limiting the gospel simply to your own personal relationship with God.

Work out the implications of your faith for the way you handle your money – what does Jesus’ death mean for you in terms of how much you’re willing to give, your tithes to the church, your charity to the poor. Work out the implications of the gospel regarding your money. Work the gospel out concerning your racial views – how you relate to people who are ethnically or racially different than you. Work the implications of the gospel out concerning how you think about immigrants. Work out the gospel regarding your political views, especially if you are tempted to think along with the rest of the world right now that politics is of supreme importance and you always announce your views on Facebook or forward emails to everyone you know. Theologically, Paul would say, about all of life, look at life through gospel lenses. In everything, put the gospel first.

You know, if we Christians really believed what we claim to believe, if we really believed the gospel and if Vineyard Columbus said “We are going to center everything on the gospel and we’re really going to really think through the implications of the gospel”. Oh, brothers and sisters, we would be the most loving people and Vineyard Columbus would be the most loving church in our city and in our world.

Gospel call.

Love is Welcoming

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Love is More than a Feeling

Romans 14:1-12

- I. The breakdown of welcome
 - A. Welcome is broken down by legalism
 - B. Welcome is broken down by being opinionated
 - C. Welcome is broken down by judgmentalism

1. We tend to judge superficially
2. We tend to judge hypocritically

II. The building-up of welcome

- A. Welcome is built by knowing who we are
- B. Welcome is built by knowing who God is
- C. Welcome is built by knowing what the gospel is