

**“How to Welcome Tax Collector and Prostitutes to Church”
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I want to give something of a “how to” sermon today. It is September and we have been blessed by a number of newcomers and visitors, and so I want to ask the question: How can we all become a part of a “welcoming community.”

Jeffrey and I and Richard were at the Bishop’s Ranch last week for the annual clergy conference. We were happy to welcome a new Bishop into our midst as an assisting Bishop. His name is Steven Charleston. He comes to us from the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge MA. In fact Bishop Charleston came to that job from being Bishop of Alaska and followed my predecessor here at St. Stephen’s, Bill Rankin, at EDS. Bishop Charleston is a Choctaw Indian born and raised in Oklahoma and comes to us as an expert in multi-cultural ministry. He will make a great partner for our wonderful Bishop Marc Andrus.

All over the Bay Area the social and cultural context for ministry in the Church is becoming increasingly multicultural. We are more likely even in Belvedere to find ourselves welcoming people from very different ethnic backgrounds and walks of life than we have been used to. Ministries like Camp Create that brings together young people from Marin City and the Canal in San Rafael and young people from the Tiburon-Belvedere-Mill Valley area have become opportunities for a kind of gathering across the usual barriers that can then become models for us helping us to be more open to families from African, Latino, and Asian backgrounds. This is becoming the normal everyday life in our churches in an increasingly multicultural Bay Area.

It is hard enough for us, God’s “frozen chosen” people to get used to welcoming newcomers who look and talk like us. How many times have you greeted someone you thought you were welcoming as a newcomer only to find out that they’ve been coming to St. Stephen’s for thirty years? So I thought it might be instructive to go over a few do’s and don’ts about welcoming newcomers. I’ve given the sermon title to make it more memorable. It’s kind of a *working* title. That is, you’ll let me know how it *works*. I’m calling it: “How to Welcome Tax Collectors and Prostitutes to our Church.” Although, after learning that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York had last week condemned financial traders as, among other things, “robbers and asset strippers,” I considered renaming it: “How to Welcome Arbitragers and Short-sellers to the Church.”

I’ve got three principles that I find are helpful to keep in mind about greeting newcomers or people we haven’t met yet at Church, but before I get into that, let me try to make a few theological comments, the kind the Archbishops might well have been advised to stick to after venturing into the area of economics and finance, theological comments about the nature and purpose of that to which we in fact welcome people who wander in to St. Stephen’s. I will try to be brief, but I hope you will listen.

St. Paul is showing us the pattern for the life and growth of the Church when he tells us in today’s reading to have the “same mind” as Christ Jesus, “who though he was in the form of

God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” That is, he did not claim any status, or right, or authority because of his “form,” his structural position as a member of the Godhead. Rather he “emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant.” In other words, he laid aside his own needs and preferences, his own desires, interests, and prerogatives and took on himself the perfect imitation of his father. In John’s gospel he puts it this way: “I do everything which I see the Father do, and only that.” Rather than by grasping and rivalry the very identity of Jesus is formed in trusting relationship with the “Other” who is God.

So just as Jesus is called or *suggested* into being by his relationship with the Father, so we are formed or constituted as His Body in a similar relationship with Jesus, “humbling ourselves and becoming obedient “even to the point of death” (which of course for our purposes simply means putting the needs and interests the Other—who is Christ—with whom we are in relationship ahead of our own.) And that Other comes to us in the form of visitors, newcomers, strangers, people who may be very different from ourselves, and sometimes whose welcome presence can even call our own sense of belonging, identity, our own righteousness into question.

Because this is what Jesus says to those on his right hand of whom he approves, “When I was a stranger, you welcomed me,” and to those on his left he says, “When I was a stranger, you did not welcome me.” And of course when they raise their voices in question, unable to recall ever having or missing the opportunity to welcome him, He replies, “When you did it, or did it not to the least of these, you did it, or did it not, to me.” Now clearly this means that each and every one of those who come to visit St. Stephen’s are Christ and we ignore them at our, some might say ‘eternal,’ peril. They are not warm bodies, to fill the pews, or potential volunteers, or financial pledges, but Jesus.

And this is where it gets really theological. By that I mean apparently vague and confusing, so that you just have to blur your logical mind a bit to try to grasp it. Because in welcoming and greeting newcomers and visitors as Christ we also act as Christ, or at least with the same mind as Christ, “who emptied himself . . .” And this is how the Body of Christ is built up, not by changing anyone or converting anyone but by welcoming every visitor as Christ himself, even if they happen to be a tax collector or a treasury agent; even if they happen to be someone who has had to survive by engaging in transactions of which we, and even God, wouldn’t approve; even if they have made a comfortable living betting on the down side of financial trading.

So thank you for putting up with these theological comments. Now I want to elucidate three principles I believe we all need to keep in mind as we greet newcomers. 1) all of us have a responsibility to welcome newcomers. It is not the job of ushers, designated greeters, vestry members, the clergy, or the rector alone. But it is each and every one of our job. Let me put it another way. Never walk past someone you haven’t met yet. Stick out your hand, smile at them, welcome them. 2) Think about what to say in greeting a stranger, or someone whose name you can’t recall. There are many gracious ways to make another person feel comfortable. Find one that works for you, practice it by putting it into action often. Here are a couple of examples: Don’t ask “are you new?” Because inevitably they will replay that they have been coming since before you were born. And that’s awkward. Instead ask, “How long have you been coming to St.

Stephen's." or volunteer, "I've been coming for 3 months how about you." And 3) "Listen, Listen. Love, Love." That's the motto of the Kairos prison ministry. And I can tell you, there is no place where meeting newcomers is more fraught with anxiety and more important. If we don't make a good connection on the first evening of the Kairos weekend with one of the forty-two inmates who begin the three day weekend, they may not feel safe or comfortable about coming back. We need to take a genuine interest in them. The principle is the same for us every Sunday morning. People are yearning to be welcoming and cared about. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Listen to their story. Spend time with them. Share your story with them. How do they happen to be there this morning? What brought you to St. Stephen's.

Some of you may feel that the Church is here to meet your needs and it's not your job and your really not very good at greeting new people. And anyway, you miss seeing your friends and want to catch up with them at coffee hour. That's fine but you should know that you will be missing a profound blessing, the blessing that can only come from meeting Christ—personally. There's a wonderful story about St. Bernard of Clairvaux who had an important appointment with Jesus that he had to travel to. On the way he came across a peasant with his hand cart hopelessly stuck in the mud of the Spring thaw. St. Bernard reluctantly turned aside to help the peasant, knowing he would miss his appointment. Only then did he discover that it was Christ himself whose cart was stuck in the mud.