***How Welcoming Are We, I Mean, Really?***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 14, 2025*

*based on 1 Peter 2:2-4,9-10*

In this morning’s text, Peter addresses people as a royal priesthood, but lest we think they are aristocrats, be advised – the people he is talking about are anything but high class. Listen again to the end of the text.

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of God who called you out of darkness into God’s wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

The Christians living in Asia Minor to whom Peter writes were being persecuted because they were perceived, correctly for the most part, as a fringe counter-cultural group with values that might tend to undermine those of Roman society.

They no longer practiced the pagan religion of their contemporaries or joined in public celebrations.  Their community included women and slaves who openly defied custom by worshiping a God different from the ones ostensibly “worshipped” by their husbands or masters - an act that most people of their day would have found threatening to the very foundations of their family structure.  (Think of it: the early Christians were thought of as anti-family!).

In addition, many in their community were foreigners, literally strangers in a strange land, who had been welcomed in by the Christians.  They were a community made up of women without husbands, slaves without masters, and foreigners living in someone else's country. No wonder they were viewed with suspicion and hostility by those around them.

Now here is how it happened: the Christian Church achieved the critical mass it needed to survive, because of the reality of homelessness. Well, look, everything in life has to do with timing and location, and the establishment of religion is no different.

In the first and second century more and more people survived childhood. Most young men who entered their teen years had to decide what to do with themselves. Because of laws of primogeniture it was the first-born sons who inherited everything if there was anything to inherit. What is a young man to do, then, if her survives to the age of thirteen and his older brother is in line to inherit the family property? He might move to the burgeoning cities where he knows there is need for day-laborers. But how does he get his start?

Thousands of young men went to the cities because there was nothing for them in their hometowns. Many ended up on the streets. It was the Christians who picked them up out of the gutters; Christians who saw it as part of their mission to house them, feed them, help them to network and find those day labor jobs they needed to survive. And who funded this non-profit? Mostly, it was widows who had incomes and property.

Peter was writing to people whose social location already placed them on the fringes of society, and whose baptism now made them even more isolated from their fellow citizens. Persecution was a common occurrence. It just didn’t often happen in Coliseums. It was subtler – more like it is today.

So, let me ask a question: are we anything like that community? Are we welcoming – I mean, welcoming to everyone? LGBTQ people, yes, that’s on our radar. We try to do our best with that one. Again, I mean, everybody. Where are our blind spots?

See if you remember this famous quote – a quote that is almost a poem --

“First they came for the communists, and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the socialists, and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak out because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Do you remember who said those words? It was Martin Niemoller, a German Protestant minister, who spoke up against Hitler in 1937 and paid for it by being imprisoned for seven long years. Those words are more relevant today than any day since, with ICE rounding up legal immigrants and harassing those who try and protect them.

Well, Martin Niemoller visited this country in the 1960s and was feted as a man of great courage and heart. The Fellowship of Reconciliation sponsored his visit and a member of that group (and my best friend in ministry years later, John Heidbrink) drove him all over the country in his car so Niemoller could speak in churches about his experience. But, you know what? John said Niemoller wouldn’t speak to him; not ever.

Not when they drove together hundreds of miles in the car. Not even when they ate together at restaurants. Why, because John was merely his driver.

It didn’t matter that John was an ordained minister like Niemoller. It didn’t matter that John had gone to Harvard University. They were both white, so race wasn’t an issue. No, it was because Martin Niemoller’s openheartedness, like our own, only stretched so far. Class driven, he wouldn’t deign to speak to his driver.

That’s what I want to address this morning. The subject of our blind spots.

Fifteen years ago I was the interim pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church across the river in Irvington. We had a sign on the outside of the church that stated proudly that we were a welcoming congregation. Kind of like this church.

Well, while I was there one of the associate pastors voiced a concern that we might not be as welcoming as we advertised. She noted a couple of examples.

So, with my encouragement she organized a luncheon after church one Sunday in which a panel of seven members told how they had felt warmly welcomed, or not so welcomed. It was a huge wake-up call, full of light and love.

One of panel was a very beloved man who had long been part of the church. He spoke of how much he loved the church and yet how bothered he was that, in his estimation, most people in the congregation were kind of glib about their left-leaning political stances. He said to us, “I’m coming out of the closet today. I’m a Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln, and I’m proud of it.”

Which was great! Everyone laughed warmly. It was breath of fresh air in a church that was stuffy with an Oregon kind of liberalism. Well, there were plenty of Republicans in that church, just like this one, but many felt they couldn’t speak about it very openly.

The church had done a lot to welcome people who lived alternative lifestyles, yes, but now it was put-up or shut-up time. We were being challenged about how welcoming we really were – a good thing.

So, let me ask again – are we truly welcoming? I want you to know I’m asking this, not because the Bible says we are supposed to be nice so let’s make nice with everybody. No! As I understand it, we work hard on being welcoming for the sake of our own souls. Let me explain.

I was once at a conference with a spiritual leader I revere a lot. His name is Lawrence Kushner. He’s a rabbi from San Francisco. During a Q and A time someone asked him, “How does God speak to us?”

And Lawrence Kushner said, “God speaks to us in the voices of people we disagree with.”

I mean, look, when someone gives a speech that makes your eyes cross, or a friend or family member says something you hate, ask yourself why you are reacting to it as you are. What button is it hitting in you?

As uncomfortable as it makes us, they often have some point to make, however obscure it may sound. I mean, ask yourself, “What bit of truth or longing is behind it,” because, if the person isn’t lying intentionally, there is always something there that is personal and human – that has a history – it had to come from somewhere in that person’s life.

Eleven years ago our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA,, voted to sanction gay marriage. And many of you know the overture that made that happen originated in this congregation -- something for Southminster to forever be proud of.

You know, it took decades of wrangling for gay people to even be allowed to be ministers, elders and deacons in our denomination. When it finally happened, some liberal Presbyterians said, “Shoot, if we had just resisted the move to have the huge, mostly conservative southern branch of Presbyterians join up with us back in 1983 we could have ordained gay people 30 years ago. They slowed us way down”

I say, “Okay, that’s true, but we are a better church because we broadened our base and have many opinions. Why? Because we have had to defend the inclusive positions we have taken.

You know, when we meet only with people who agree with us we get clannish, right? We become glib and mean, and bigoted about our ideas and we make straw men out of those we disagree with us. The people who disagree with us have helped us more than anyone to hone our arguments and nuance our creeds and broaden our notion of truth, and identify our blind spots.

Here's the kicker: I suspect that if we can’t welcome our opposition, we will do a lousy job of welcoming the people we believe we are called to welcome.

Peter’s church was committed to that enterprise. They brought desperate people in out of the cold from all over the known world and together they created a creed to live by that was larger than all of them. On this “Welcome Back Sunday” let me ask us, are we welcoming to everybody?

I’ll close with this. A friend of mine who is a pastor in Simi Valley, Calfornia, Jim Burklo, wrote something Thursday about the assassination of young Charlie Kirk. It gets right to the bottom of what we’re discussing here. Jim wrote:

*We rightly grieve the death of the Charlie Kirk who was: the Charlie Kirk we knew. But we also ought to grieve the Charlie Kirk who wasn’t yet: the Charlie Kirk we’ll never know.*

*Charlie Kirk was a new Christian when he died. He was a secular humanist until about 2020. We’ll never know where his Christian journey might have taken him. He might well have come to embrace a much deeper love in Jesus, and grown out of the narrow fundamentalism in which his faith began. He was caring and kind toward his family and friends and followers. Following the Christ further, he might well have become compassionate and respectful toward immigrants, sexual and ethnic and religious minorities, and political liberals.*

*In the future that was horribly denied him, he might well have had encounters with people who could have broken him free from his prejudices and inspired him to ask for forgiveness for the cruel insults and divisive rhetoric of his past.*

*He might have met the Christ in people he once demonized. He might have made amends and put his remarkable communication skills and personal charisma into the service of bringing Americans together. His conversion was just beginning, and we’ll never know how it would have unfolded. Let us lay aside judging him for who he was, and instead open our hearts to grieve the loss of the person he could have become.*

Amen