

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Rick Veit  
010817 1030

### **A Cathedral Welcome**

**We extend a special welcome** to those who are single, divorced, widowed, gay, confused, filthy rich, comfortable, or dirt poor.

**We extend a special welcome** to wailing babies and excited toddlers.

**We welcome you** whether you can sing like Pavarotti or just growl quietly to yourself. You're welcome here if you're just browsing, just woken up or just got out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury, or haven't been to church since Christmas ten years ago.

**We extend a special welcome** to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit mums, football dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like organised religion. (We're not that keen on it either!)

**We offer a welcome** to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or are here because granny is visiting and wanted to come to the cathedral.

**We welcome those** who are inked, pierced, both or neither. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as kids or got lost in the city centre and wound up here by mistake. We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters...and YOU!  
(with kind permission of Coventry Cathedral)

Why do we spend so much time these days in the Episcopal Church emphasizing Welcome, Welcome, Welcome? It has almost become a bit cliché. "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!" has even become our unofficial slogan that we use. Is that really what we are all about? Outreach is important. Sure. Being neighborly is a good idea. Yes. But what about prayer and worship? What about fellowship and Bible study? Yes, those are important as well.

BUT, and this is a big BUT. I have it all capitals. BUT, we have noticed over thousands of years that when a person becomes baptized and drawn into the faith community, an odd and even unhealthy shift begins to occur. In the midst of their new life in Christ, darkness somehow seems to take hold almost immediately. The person is now considered an insider, a true Christian, one that has the answer in them, Jesus Christ. This, of course, implies that there are all of those *outsiders*, those *heathens*, still living in sin and hell. The new Christian begins to suffer from exclusivism. They begin to actually live into a life of judgement, judging, pointing out the wrongs of others, sometimes choosing to even separate from them. They begin to think that they

are on a pedestal with all of the answers, pointing their finger at all of those *others* out there, those who don't have the all the answers.

There is a radical shift that occurred theologically about two thousand years ago. The faith community of Jews considered themselves to be the sole chosen people of God. In the spirit of exclusivism, they were the only ones. When non-Jews, or Gentiles, wanted to follow The Way, they were often rejected because they were not Jewish. The people of the Old Covenant believed in a God who loved them, but would wipe them out, in fact, kill them and kill any non-Jew, if they ever did wrong or were unfaithful.

When God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world, the message began to change. Forgiveness and unconditional love began to trump judgement and death. The consequences of sin did not have the final say anymore. Unconditional love and welcome and acceptance and forgiveness for all, not just the Jewish people, became the base. When people messed up, God drew closer to help them. When they became lost, God approached and led the way to be found again. When they began drifting away, God, through his Son Jesus, began drawing them near. With what became known as Christianity, outsiders and insiders were welcome. They became known as people of the New Covenant, or The Way, a way grounded in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, their Lord and Savior.

One of Jesus' disciples, Peter, in the book of ACTS, teaches that God shows no partiality. Anyone wanting to follow God, could follow God. And all became welcome to be with God forever.

Even with Christianity though, the "Welcome" somehow faded. They almost immediately began to stray, living in judgement of those not Christian, living in exclusion, not wanting to be tainted by non-Christians. Quite often, and continuing to this day, Christians have lived out their faith similar to how the Jewish people lived out theirs, filled with judgement and exclusion.

A new movement has begun. Are you getting this Nolan? Nolan is the boy about to be baptized today. His parents, Mike and Colleen Rankin, and his godparents, Kelly and Cindy Rankin, will be presenting him today. A new movement has begun, one not of exclusion and judgement towards others, but one of true unconditional love and unconditional welcome, even welcome to those who are difficult to love, ones like myself, at times.

Nolan, I would ask that as you begin your new life in Christ that you please forgive me when I stray away from love and compassion and empathy and faith. Please forgive me if I ever become too judgmental towards others or begin to welcome people less, especially if they are difficult to be around.

In Christ, we walk differently now. When someone is suffering, draw closer to them, maybe even befriend them.

At youth group recently, as we were discussing suicide and how to deal with it and deal with others who may be considering it, one girl said that maybe she would try to become a friend to

that person. Maybe she would consider listening to them and then leading them to get the help that they need.

Nolan, who is suffering here today within these walls and even outside these walls? In fact, I would like everyone to please turn to the person who is sitting around you and ask them if they are suffering. I realize that this may seem a bit superficial, but recognize that people all around us may be suffering, with sin, with disease, with dis-ease, with sadness, with confusion. Those are the people we are particularly called to reach out too. We are them.

And here is a secret for Nolan. (quiet voice) - Most of the time, you don't know who these suffering people are. And if you are living a life of judgement, you will completely miss the suffering in them. Nolan, begin with your parents. Sometimes, they suffer. Love them. Keep loving them, even if they annoy you or get mad at you. It probably means that they are suffering for some reason. Love them even more. Don't end with your parents though. Love your godparents, and your grandparents and cousins and friends. Okay, now the Christian life gets a little tougher. As a Christian, you are to love the strangers in your midst, those that you don't know and those that you barely know. Love the people at St. Marks, in Cheyenne, in America. Love the people in Syria. How are you going to love the people in Syria? Now, we go one step deeper. Nolan, love your enemies, those people who hurt you or want to hurt you. Douse them, most of all, with love. Stand up for the weak, the judged. Stand against those who misuse their power and are overly judging. And love them unconditionally.

As you rise up out of the waters of baptism, you will be called to live this new life, and to draw others into this way of welcome and love. And the heavens will be opened, and as you love, you will begin to see the Spirit of God descending upon the world more and more, lighting all that there is to see. And a voice from heaven will say to you, "Nolan, you are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Now continue in your life in Christ.