

Welcoming the Other

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Who is the other? There are people who we might call the *exotic other*. These are the people who live far away from us in a distant land. We read about them in books, documentaries, and movies. With our planet becoming a global village, the exotic other is becoming less exotic every single day. Then there is the *neighborly other*. These people just live next door to us. They are our neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Closely related to the neighborly other is the *religiously other*. These are the people of other faith traditions. I can also think of the *theologically others*. They are Christians, but their views of Christianity are different from us.

While I do not need to persuade anyone the need to welcome others, there are roadblocks to practicing it in churches. Part of it is fear. We might fear not knowing what to do. We might have tried before but failed. There is another kind of fear – fear for being overwhelmed by others and their ways. It is like a guest in your house who would start to bring in her own furniture, rearrange things and take out yours. She starts playing music and cooks food you don't like. Then you kindly remind her whose house it is. You yelled at her with a convincing tone, "Go back home where you can live your way!" Insecurity and fear of change get the best of us.

There is another kind of fear – fear to be punished. We might have genuinely believed that this house the way it looks is good enough. In this sense, we see ourselves as managers of this house, that means, let no one change the way it looks. We fear that if we allow the others to alter the assumed understanding of things, God would be angry towards us; then *we* are in trouble. The fear of upsetting God turns us away from entertaining the possibilities.

But as gospel people, we should not fear. Living with the other is an expression of God's message of grace. We have Jesus as our mentor as he ventured out and dined with the others. The gospel accounts are constantly filled with stories of how Jesus challenged the people of his times to think otherwise. Numerous times Jesus says, "You heard it said..., but I say...." The Christian message of hope is that Christ died on the cross for all humanity. The true guardian is Christ, not us. Grace is truly grace when I let God's overwhelming bounty of generosity embrace me, even surprise me. I am willing to let go my own sense of righteousness, accomplishment, and sometimes insecurity. This is not an argument for "anything goes." Instead, it is to recognize God's garden as big enough for surprises. In God's house, there are many mansions. Welcoming others is the call of the Holy Spirit.

We easily think of many people of different races, cultures and religions as others. But wait! We cannot speak of "the other" without speaking of "ourselves." When we speak of other, we assume the position of the center. But what is the missing angle? For others are always others to someone else. To exercise any sincerity in welcoming strangers is to practice what Miroslav Volf, a theologian, calls "inverting perspectives." According to Volf, the idea of otherness is a two-way street - a reciprocal relationship. That is, **if others are "other" to me, then I am an**

“other” to them. It is absolutely important for us to remember that otherness is not a neutral term when describing differences. Realizing reciprocity in our discussion of otherness give us reasons to be interested not only in what we think about ourselves and about others, but also in what others think of themselves and of us. Volf reminds us that we cannot live truthful lives with others (and I add: we cannot live authentic lives among ourselves) if the only perspectives we are willing to entertain is our own. **If we have only one perspective, we have none.**

Inverting perspectives mean we are willing to see others through their own eyes. Fundamental to the practice of genuine hospitality is to suspend our presumed understanding of the other. We need to turn our listening ears to listen to their stories as they are told. This is a humble attitude on our part recognizing the possibility that we might be wrong and others right. The other side of the same coin is the need to see ourselves through the eyes of the others. We need to learn how we are perceived by the others. How do we sound to them? Do they see us as welcoming? To do this, we must be willing to suspend judgment.

Welcoming others means creating space for them in our own identity. True welcoming is a two-way street. We allow the other to reshape our identity and let them be part of who we are. It is not to threaten our own existence but to enrich and deepen the texture of our identity. If Christian faith is a journey, then traveling exclusively in our familiar territory of neighborhood is the most boring trip of all time. We are called to expand our horizon and explore the otherwise as we are called to sing new songs to the Lord's. We are also called to critique and correct our mistakes. Thinking too much how others need to change (or repent) but not Christians are to slide back to the colonial mindset. We need the light of Christ to shine on us so that we see our own arrogance.

To be a welcoming people of God is to have the courage to ask how others want to be welcome. Because of this understanding, I always think that the idea of welcoming is a dangerous one. Hospitality does not mean flinging wide the church door. It does mean, however, the willingness to listen, to learn, to adjust, to suspend judgment, and to change.