

We Are Disciples: Welcome--All Means All

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A little over a year ago, in July 2013, our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) gathered together in Orlando, Florida, for General Assembly. It was my second General Assembly, the first as a Disciples minister. And I was excited.

For decades, our denomination had been in discernment over the controversial issue of sexual orientation, and how our church should welcome those who may be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. 2013 was the year we would finally act on our discernment.

One of the phrases repeated throughout the Assembly, on T-shirts and signs, was “All Means All”. The statement was meant as a challenge. Our church identity statement says “We Welcome All to the Lord’s Table”, but do we really? And does All *really* mean All?

During the business sessions of the General Assembly, statements called “resolutions” are brought before the Assembly for a vote. The resolutions are usually around current social issues. Now, we are Disciples. No one can tell us what to do. So, these resolutions are non-binding statements intended to challenge our thinking and our actions. They are attempts to lead the conversation, challenging the church to change.

One such resolution brought this year attempted to change the conversation in our Church on sexual orientation, called “Resolution 1327: Becoming a People of Grace and Welcome to All”. The resolution is about a page long, but I will read a few parts:

“...The General Assembly...calls upon the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to recognize itself as *striving* to become a people of grace and welcome to all God’s children though differing in race, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, ethnicity, marital status, physical or mental ability, political stance or theological perspective.”

...we call “upon the church to affirm the faith, baptism and spiritual gifts of all Christians regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and that neither is grounds for exclusion from fellowship or service within the church”...and that churches should “acknowledge their support for the welcome of and hospitality to all.”

I will never forget the atmosphere in the convention hall as the resolution was being brought to the floor. Those speaking against the resolution shared their struggle with certain texts in scripture which, they believed, condemned homosexuality. They loved the church, and they loved scripture, and they wanted to ensure that their church was faithful to God’s word. They also expressed their fear that if the church took a stand on

this issue, then it would make those who didn't agree feel unwelcome in the church they so dearly loved.

Those speaking in favor of the resolution shared their own story of coming to terms with their sexual orientation, or that of a loved one or child. They, too, loved scripture, and through their study, had come to believe that God does *not* condemn people who are gay. They longed for a church that welcomed them, just as they were.

Everyone on all sides of the conversation was respectful and loving, even though we disagreed. When it was time to vote, I along with the majority, over 3/4ths of those gathered, proudly stood in support of this resolution, calling our church to become a people of Grace and Welcome for all.

After the resolution passed, there was no applause. Instead, Rev. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President, led us in prayer, a prayer for unity in the midst of disagreement.

Now, I don't know how everyone of us feels about this conversation. It is a difficult one, because it is one that touches on who we are as human beings and how we read scripture. There's a lot to be said, and we can and should have those conversations, as we discern God's will for our church, here and now. And we can disagree, and still love, welcome and support one another.

But one thing we cannot do is ignore the conversation. Many young people are turning their backs on church, because they believe we are not places where all are welcome. They live lives of welcome and acceptance, and they will not wait around for the church to make up their mind on this issue. We cannot ignore the conversation.

The text read a few moments ago is one of the most difficult in all of scripture, and a text we would rather ignore.

In this text, Jesus doesn't present himself as a king or some celebrity, nor as a friend or member of our family. Jesus presents himself as one who is hungry and thirsty. One who is naked and a stranger. One who is sick. One who is imprisoned.

It's not in the familiar and friendly that Jesus is seen, but in the face of the stranger, in the face of the one who would make us uncomfortable and vulnerable.

We say "All are welcome" a lot around here, and I believe it is true. We are a church that welcomes all. But I also believe that we have some work to do--that I have some work to do--in order to better live into that statement.

Because here's the thing: when we say "All Are Welcome," people may believe us. When

all are welcome, then you never know who may walk through those doors. Welcome makes us vulnerable.

Welcoming all isn't a sign or a saying, it's a way of life. To be a church that welcomes all is to be a church that is active in inviting others, a church that keeps the doors open, that will move over from the table of Christ to make room for new people.

Welcoming all is to welcome in those who make us uncomfortable. Not just our friends, those who look like us and think like us. Not just people who will be active in ministry and give generously.

Welcoming all is welcoming in those who may take more from us than we can give; those who may push us, and cause us to rethink what we believe.

Welcoming all means that we can't always do things the way we've always done things. It means priorities sometimes have to change, in order to make the other feel welcome.

Welcoming all is welcoming everyone, no matter how different they may be, as if they are Jesus. For if we turn away those who are not like us, those who make us uncomfortable, we turn away Jesus.

Whatever you did to the least of these, Jesus said, you did it to me.

I grew up believing that God hated gay people. And then, God gave me a roommate in my Christian College who was gay, Wes. And I saw first hand how Wes dealt with rejection from his church and his family. I saw how hard he struggled to like girls, going to therapy every week to force himself to be straight. I saw him on his knees in tears, praying for God to take this away. And I saw him almost give up on God altogether.

And then, when we were in seminary together, he found a church that welcomed him as he was, and showed him God's love. This church saved his life. And as I saw him find new joy, it changed me, and it forever changed the way I saw God.

When our seminary found out he was gay, they took away his scholarship. They weren't bold enough to just kick him out, so they took the passive-aggressive route. But you know who ended up welcoming Wes in? Brite Divinity School, a Disciples of Christ seminary. He finished seminary, graduated the top of his class, and today serves a church in St. Louis that is a beacon of God's welcoming love.

I welcomed Wes into my life, and because of it, Christ changed me forever. Other than Marti, no other person has had such a profound impact on my life as Wes. I have spent a lot of time wrestling over the welcome of God. And I've become convinced, that God truly welcomes all. And ALL does mean ALL.

That's my story. I hope you don't mind me being honest and sharing. What is your story? Who have you welcomed? Who will you welcome? Who has changed you? God's love is big enough for us all. All our flaws. All our imperfections. Everyone of us are God's children, though differing in race, in gender, in age, sexual orientation, gender identity, in nationality, ethnicity, marital status, physical or mental ability, political stance or theological perspective.

God welcomes us all. God's love is big enough for us all. Let us build a house where all are welcome.

For in this place, there's enough love for all of us.

Let us sing of God's Love, number 295: In This Very Room, (verses 1 & 2).