

**Welcome**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – July 2, 2023**

**Please Read:**  
**Romans 15:7**  
**Matthew 10:40-42**

Have you heard the joke about how the Supreme Court has been making some rash decisions lately? One could almost say they've been acting Ruth-lessly... 😊 Seriously, the Supreme Court decisions handed down this week have received loud responses. I found David French's opinion yesterday in the *New York Times* on the *303 Creative L.L.C. vs. Elenis* case particularly helpful to better understand the importance of protecting First Amendment free speech rights. A web designer, Lorie Smith, said she was not willing to design websites that contained messages that violated her religious beliefs. As much as I might *disagree* with the Colorado plaintiff's exclusivist views, I *agree* the state should not be allowed to coerce anyone to express views contrary to their religious beliefs. Justice Gorsuch, who wrote the majority opinion, argued when one does encounter objectionable speech, "tolerance, not coercion, is our nation's answer."<sup>1</sup>

Both of our lessons today talk about welcome, and I would like you to consider the important distinction between *welcome* and *tolerance*. Unfortunately, in Christian communities, too often we put an "All are Welcome" sign up, but have settled for *toleration*. I believe that welcome is to tolerance what tolerance is to coercion. Not quite opposites, but almost...

Paul writes, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15.7). The good news here is that Christ welcomes us all. But the good news also comes with an action item. The word here for welcome in the Greek is the imperative, *προσλαμβανεσθε*, which more literally means to "take to oneself" or to "receive." Paul has emphasized throughout his letter to the church in Rome how important God's grace is. This is the heart of the gospel: God has welcomed us despite our sin, despite our problems, despite our differences, despite the fact that we and our world are not always the way it's supposed to be.

And so, Paul, admonishes the congregation in Rome to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. The command is simple: you also ought to welcome one another... The problem Paul was addressing in the first century is still relevant today. There were "strong" and there were "weak" believers in the fellowship. Paul

---

<sup>1</sup> David French, "Christians and Drag Queens Both Defend the First Amendment" (*New York Times*, July 1, 2023), A18.

in our Romans text was addressing in the community those Christians who were gentiles and those who were of Jewish background. There were conflicts over whether or not the purity codes of Jewish faith were still relevant to the church.

Some, in fact, were only eating vegetables, and Paul considers this “weak.” No offense to those of you who are vegetarians, because it’s not about cruelty to animals or for health reasons that food was an issue. The issue in Rome was most likely about food sacrificed to the Roman gods. Some Christians felt like it was dishonoring to God to eat meat that had been blessed to honor pagan idols...

Paul took a conciliatory tone. It wasn’t that abstaining was right or wrong, it just wasn’t central to the faith. There were also issues of holy days, when was Sabbath or holidays... But what’s interesting to me is the conclusion that Paul draws for the community ethic: The strong should defer to the weak. The strong should not overpower the weak, but “resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another...” Later in chapter 14 he writes, “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building.”

In other words, you can have your personal convictions about all kinds of ethical and moral issues. *Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another?* (Paul asks, for “God has welcomed them!”) Rather, you should ask yourself, “what is going to serve my neighbor best, and how will what I say or do make for peace and for mutual up-building in the community?” Richard Baxter, the 16-century activist and writer put it this way: “In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all else charity.” This is the ethic for Christian community. Paul writes more bluntly in chapter 15 that “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves!” Isn’t that amazing? It’s not that *might makes right* in Christian community, but rather *pleasing others is pleasing to God*. It’s all about the centrality of Christ. His example should be our guide.

I think a version of this ethic is what our founding fathers sought to establish as the ethos for our country, and this would be helpful to remember today. Tolerance. Fairness. Equality. The protection of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... But Christians have a higher calling. Christ calls us not to settle for a worldly *toleration*, but *transformation* through love of our neighbors, especially the weak, the powerless, the orphan, the widow, the poor or marginalized. We are called *not* to make others see it our way, but we are to yield to Christ’s way. Christ gave up himself so that we might receive the welcome of God, and we are commanded to extend the same gracious welcome of God to all!

On this weekend when we celebrate the birth of our nation in the midst of competing visions for our nation, more than anything else, we need to remember and embrace the welcome of God extended to us in Jesus Christ, and how the church is called to be a sanctuary community, a safe “place” where all are received with compassion and mercy, recognizing everyone is fighting a battle, and that we need to bear with one another with patience and gentleness, not judging one another, speaking the truth in love.

But here proclamation in word alone is not enough. For those who are victimized by the powers and principalities of this world, there is a need for action, for activist testimony to the in-breaking of God’s justice and mercy. In between now and the time when Jesus will come again, God calls the church to proclaim in all of life, sometimes against all odds, the truth of Jesus' radical welcome. He said, "*Whoever comes to me I will no way cast out.*" As the body of Christ we are called to embrace with God’s welcome anyone who comes seeking grace and redemption.

Spoiler Alert: A great example of this is found in the final season of *Ted Lasso*. The team is beginning to gel into a community that rejects toxic machismo. They have embraced mental health therapy, confronted various forms of misogyny, and learned to respect the “unimportant” members of the team’s staff. This is no small feat for a men’s sports team. But the specter of potential homophobia looms...

The show introduces this challenge just how you might expect: Colin, one of the members of the club is gay, but in the closet, unsure of if or when to come out to his teammates. The first player to learn of his sexuality is his best friend Isaac, who accidentally discovers sexual text messages from men on Colin’s phone. Isaac immediately becomes angry and standoffish toward his friend, and as a viewer we are left to wonder if he is simply being homophobic.

Eventually Colin stands up in the locker room and reveals the truth to his teammates. This scene is the club’s true faceoff with the issue of welcome. Around the room, one after another, the footballers voice their support, culminating in an insistence that the players *don’t care* that he’s gay. They mean it in a good way: we won’t treat you differently than we did before, we won’t make fun of you, etc. And indeed, as they make this declaration, we can see the relief and reassurance on Colin’s face. The dragon, it would seem, has been slain.

But coach Ted Lasso raises the team’s eyes to a new moral horizon. He tells a parable about a childhood friend who was a Denver Broncos fan in a town of Kansas City Chiefs supporters. The weakness of the analogy is part of the joke, but

it still resonates with the team. Ted explains that when his friend came out as a Broncos fan, Ted's message was "I don't care that you're a Broncos fan," and he meant it in a good way: I will still be friends with you no matter what team you cheer for... But when the Broncos reached the Super Bowl two years in a row, his friend celebrated alone, without Ted's friendship... because ultimately Ted was true to his words and didn't care. Ted confessed to the team he was ashamed that when the Bronco's celebrated their Super Bowl victory, none of their group of friends joined him. He was very much alone.

Returning from his memory to the question of Colin's sexuality, Ted revises the team's answer and says, "Colin, we don't *not* care. We care very much. We care about who you are and what you must've been going through. From now on, you don't have to go through it all by yourself."<sup>2</sup>

Colin's is a story of grace, of surprising welcome, of receiving someone the world might overlook or reject. But here's the kicker, welcoming the outsider is not a duty, it is a privilege! Jesus says when someone welcomes you, they welcome him. Later in chapter 25, Jesus says when you have cared for the least of these, *you have cared for me*. You see the difference? Not just tolerating, but welcoming. That's what we do here around this table. Everyone has a place. We make space for the other. Brother. Sister. Sibling. We treat others as friends of God, because God welcomes all.

So, while as a nation we may celebrate toleration, here we celebrate welcome. Christ has lovingly chosen us, broken and weak though we may be. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has opened the way for unlimited welcome for all and calls us to embody that welcome through grace and love for all.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Jon Mathieu wrote about this in the *Christian Century* newsletter in the June 22, 2023 online edition. I referenced this on June 27, 2023: [https://www.redletterchristians.org/a-pride-month-lesson-from-ted-lasso/?utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=8c393a9cd0-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_EdPicks\\_2023-06-27&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b00cd618da-8c393a9cd0-86112467](https://www.redletterchristians.org/a-pride-month-lesson-from-ted-lasso/?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=8c393a9cd0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2023-06-27&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-8c393a9cd0-86112467)