

All Are Welcome

1. Warm up: Who's your favorite princess from the Disney movies – and why? Or if you're not familiar with the Disney princesses, who's your favorite character in an animated movie – and why?
2. On Sunday, Pastor Crystal reminded us how much we love our routines. For example, most of us probably have our "church routine" – same parking spot, same sanctuary seat, same group of people we talk to before or after service. What's your church routine? And why do you think we're so drawn to routines?
3. We all carry a deep human desire for personal inclusion – the longing to be seen accepted, and loved for who we uniquely are. If you pay close attention to storytelling, this longing for access – to be on the guest list and experience the full kingdom of God – is everywhere. That's Ariel, the Little Mermaid. Driven by curiosity, she stands on the edge of the shore, staring at a world she's barred from, singing, *"Up where they walk, up where they run . . . wish I could be part of that world."* She wasn't just curious; she wanted total access to a realm she was locked out of, longing for a kingdom that would welcome her identity without making her sacrifice her voice. The same is also true for Belle, Pocahontas, and Tiana – and many of us.
 - a. Tell us about a time in your life when you felt you didn't fit or weren't wanted. What happened? How did that impact you?
 - b. In the Bible, Simon Peter says, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." Acts 10:34-35. Yet even in churches we can fall short. Whether in church or other settings, why is it so hard for us humans to be truly inclusive and welcoming? What are the emotional and psychological factors in play?
4. In I Corinthians 12:18-23, the Apostle Paul reminds us how God constructs community. Let's read that passage together, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. When we consider the foregoing passage in the context of a conversation about inclusion, what does it say to us? What insights does it offer, especially with regard to the kind of people we might be tempted to look down on?
 - b. What does the foregoing passage tell us about how God feels about the people that others are tempted to look down on?
 - c. The early churches strove to follow the example of Jesus and be radically inclusive, but often still struggled. James, the brother of Jesus, once critiqued the several of the early churches like this: "My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' while you say to the poor

man, ‘You stand over there,’ or, ‘Sit down at my feet,’ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” James 2:1-4. Have you ever seen something similar happen in a church you attended? If so, what did it look like and feel like? In what ways might our church be tempted to fall into a similar trap?

- d. Crystal said, “When we stick strictly to our routines – sitting in the same isolated circles, reserving our spots, keeping our tables closed to people who look or think differently – we start acting like bouncers at the door. We turn God’s open sanctuary into an exclusive, private club.” Your thoughts?
5. Human systems are built on velvet ropes, cover charges, and exclusive access. But Jesus was different. Read Luke 14:16-24, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. What does the foregoing passage tell us about Jesus and how he would want his followers and his churches to behave?
 - b. Ephesians 2:13-14, and 19 says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Put that passage in your own words. What’s it saying?
 - c. In the Jerusalem temple, there was an inner chamber called the “Holy of Holies” where the presence of God was thought to dwell with special power. It was separated from the rest of the temple by a thick, ornate curtain. No one could enter the Holy of Holies except certain priests at certain times. On the cross, when Jesus breathed his last and died, the curtain that walled off the Holy of Holies was torn in two. What was God trying to tell us?
6. Crystal said, “It is easy to recite our poem every Sunday. It is much harder – and much more holy – to be inclusive when we step out into the parking lot, into our workplaces, and into our schools. Are we, even unintentionally, playing security guard at the gate? Are we part of the systemic setbacks people face, or are we actively throwing the doors open so everyone gets VIP access to grace? I KNOW I have done it. I have been the mean girl who said “you can’t sit with us” on various occasions because of someone being different. And if I didn’t say it with my words, my actions displayed those very thoughts.” So, Crystal challenged us to redouble our efforts, here at church and wherever we go, to reflect the radical inclusiveness of Jesus. She offered us three practical suggestions laid out on pp. 3-4. Take a look.
 - a. With regard to the first point, why is it so hard for us to sit down next to someone we don’t know and strike up a conversation?

- b. With regard to the second point, tell us about someone (at work, church, or other social circles) that you wouldn't normally connect with, but got to know, and became very fond of.
- c. With regard to the third point, whose someone you know that's been hurt by religious rejection, pushed to the margins, or made to feel like they don't belong. What could a church like ours mean to them? Will you invite them?

I Corinthians 12:18-23

¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty.

Luke 14:16-24

¹⁶ Jesus told this parable: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷ At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' ¹⁸ "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' ¹⁹ "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' ²⁰ "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

²¹ "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

²² "'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' ²³ "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴ I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

Three Ways to Practice the Radical Inclusion of Jesus

1. **Switch Your Table.** Break your routine. In the fellowship hall or service next week, at work tomorrow, or in the school cafeteria this week, don't just sit in your usual spot with your usual circle. Look for the open chair next to someone you don't know yet, or sit with someone who is sitting alone. Intentionally drop your own personal velvet rope.
2. **Learn One Hidden Story.** Instead of making assumptions based on how someone looks, dresses, or identifies, ask an open question and truly listen. Say, *"Tell me about your week,"* or *"What brought you here today?"* Value their full humanity, remember that everyone carries unseen burdens, and let them know their voice matters.

3. **Extend a Direct Invitation.** Think of someone in your life who has been hurt by religious rejection, pushed to the margins, or made to feel like they don't belong. Put their name on your personal guest list. Reach out to them this week – invite them to coffee, invite them to lunch, or invite them to sit next to you right here next Sunday. Let them know there is a seat reserved just for them.