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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Isaiah 56:5-8

A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE

Today we reach the end of the beginning of a journey to helping this place to become a house of prayer for all people. But as with any journey, even a faith journey, there are possible pitfalls because the church is still a human institution. As such, our shortcomings all too often show up. John Buchanan, who was a prominent Presbyterian pastor, wrote, “When we think about the history of the church and where we are today, we do realize that part of the way that the church has lived its life and sought to define itself is by understanding the church over and against something else, over and against the world, or society, or the church over and against pagans, or heretics.”¹ It can be about enforcing rituals regarding washing hands or simply an unwillingness to welcome someone who does things slightly differently, but the power tools the church has used in living out such an identity established over against has involved the practice of exclusion and judgmental proclamations. In many ways, mainline Protestant Christianity in the 21st century Church is reaping the ill rewards of its less than welcoming stances. In numerous demographic studies, the Pew Research Center has found that people are leaving Christianity because they view the church as hypocritical, judgmental and insincere.² We have spent much precious time validating credentials at our doorways even while God’s grace has been busy calling for a joyous feast of welcome. We have missed out because we have tried to be the gatekeepers instead of having it as a priority for us to reflect God’s welcoming Spirit.

If the question is who gets to say who is welcome, I believe that the answer is finally returning to its rightful place: to the One whose welcoming love has called humanity home from the beginning. After a long history of not putting really out a welcome mat, can we simply imagine what it would be like if the church could finally become a place of fertile, welcoming soil; a place of radical inclusivity in which all find a place of welcome, love and value? Think of what it would mean for those within our surrounding community, some of whom have had a difficult time recognizing Jesus because of Jesus’ own followers.

When the Capital Campaign Promotional Committee was trying to decide what APC's campaign theme would be, we turned to scripture to explore the concept of access. That's what the largest part of our anticipated building project is to be about. What resonated with the committee was the passage from Isaiah we heard earlier. In times before this passage, the primary understanding was that there were to be certain limits on who could come into the temple of the Lord. Those who brought animal sacrifices were not to use animals that were less than physically sound. They were to bring only the highest quality offerings. That practice somehow shaped the earlier mindset about which humans were welcome to come into the holy space of the temple. Those with certain physical challenges were somehow understood not to be welcome. However, after the Hebrew people had an experience of being outcasts themselves, during that time of great challenge to their own identity when they had been held as exiles in the foreign land of Babylon, they came back to their homeland with a broader understanding of who they were. They had grown in their views of who ought to be welcome in God's presence. No longer were there to be those who were outcasts from the temple. It was to be a house of prayer for all peoples. The divine grace they had experienced had transformed their understanding of their identity as the people of God – one that was much broader and less exclusive. It was an identity formed not over and against some other group, but shaped by the love and grace of God.

In light of who God is, we get to explore the great divine welcome to you and me. But we go off the rails when we try to limit the breadth of God's grace indicating it is only for us. The pouring of baptismal water, the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup demonstrate God's great desire to welcome beloved children home. A sacrament is something physical that demonstrates something about God. Through this capital campaign, we are saying we want this church facility to reflect God's good news of welcome.

I am so thankful for all who have had a part in putting together the message of this capital campaign. I am excited and I hope you are about the possibility of us making Abington Presbyterian Church's facilities fully accessible for the first time in its 304 year history. I have to admit that detailed drawings of the log cabin in which the church first met have not survived the years – but for at least the last 250 years, we have not been fully accessible.

How does a church become a house of prayer for all people? We do have to have facilities out of which to serve our God, a God whose love knows no bounds. Imagine a house of prayer that love built, a house of prayer that fully reflected God's welcome. It would not have stairs as the only option for getting from the sanctuary to any other part of the building or vice versa. I am thankful for those who have envisioned making our facilities more welcoming to people of varied physical abilities, but to become a house of prayer for all people will require more than our pledges and gifts to the capital campaign. I celebrate your willingness to support the envisioned construction projects of this campaign, but becoming a house of prayer for all people goes beyond brick and mortar. God is interested in how our building reflects a divine welcome, but perhaps is even more interested in how our hearts reflect God's heart.

Some have raised legitimate questions about why there would be a mission component as part of a capital campaign, as ours has. Our house of prayer for all people theme guides us in this regard. Not only is this to be a house for all people, with full access. It is to be a house of prayer for all people! The church can't be a place where we gather to focus only on our own needs. The act of praying calls upon us not only to be sensitive to the needs of those with mobility challenges, but to also be responsive to those with other kinds of needs. The mission component of this campaign focuses on those who need God's good gift of education (a very Presbyterian thing) in order for them to get to have full access to the future God wants for them, whether that is through a mentoring facility in West Kensington or educational enhancements at the Village ministry or through our partnership with a Presbyterian school in Pakistan that is offering access to education to girls who otherwise would have to go without it. Swiss theologian Emil Brunner wrote, "the church exists by mission as fire does by burning."³ This is a core part of our identity.

Springtime seems like it is finally here. I heard about a Minnesota woman who was doing the hopeful work of spring, transplanting small lettuce plants that had gotten started inside the house because the growing season there is pretty short. As she was transplanting the lettuce into the raised beds out in the back yard, a curious five year old next door neighbor wandered over. Little Myla asked if she could help with the planting. The woman showed her how to prepare the soil and to carefully

place each of the young plants into this garden. The girl paused as she looked at the lettuce and asked, “Is this scary for the plants, going from one place to another?” The woman responded in comforting tones, “No, it’s like coming home.” It seemed that the five year old liked that thought. Thereafter, with each and every plant they transferred, the little girl whispered to each plant, “Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home.”⁴

That is the message God wants to convey to all who might come to this place. You and I have experienced that welcome. We have the great opportunity, perhaps even a calling for that divine welcome to be a consistent message here. Friends, God’s beloved, we are moving toward becoming a house of prayer for all people, as we take actions that help us say, “Welcome home, welcome home, welcome home.”

¹John Buchanan, *A New Church for a New World*, Geneva Press, 2008

²<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/27/faith-in-flux/>

³Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World*, London: SCM Press, 1931, p. 11

⁴Story told by Brennan Blue in a sermon, *On the Road: Who Decides Who’s Welcome?*, October 15, 2017, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, MN