

"All Are Welcome. Really? Or Really..."

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What does it mean when you say, "all are welcome"?

A few years ago, three of us from our church met with leaders from another local congregation to explore sharing space. We needed room; they had it. They needed a boost to their ministries; we could help. Thirty of their leaders gathered around a large table to meet with us—a sign they were serious. After an hour of pleasant enough questioning, they thanked us and said they'd be in touch.

The next morning, I received a call at the church office from a man I didn't know.

"Pastor, you likely don't remember who I am," he said graciously, "but I was at that meeting last night." He described himself and where he'd sat in the room. Then he said, "I didn't sleep at all last night after our meeting."

He shared how he'd told the committees after we left that he wasn't in favor of offering us their space because, to him, we "allowed the wrong people to be involved in ministry."

My heart sank—not because the answer was no, but because of what he'd said about welcoming the "wrong" people.

Then he asked me if I'd seen the sign by the entrance to their church. I hadn't. He went on to share that it was a sign he had proudly made and displayed for his congregation: "All Are Welcome."

He said those words—that sign—and his own words from the night before were at odds in his mind. He'd lost an entire night's sleep wrestling with the two competing thoughts. He was hesitant to show us welcome based on the fact that we welcomed all.

The call ended with his confession and apology. What a gift. I thanked him for feeling comfortable enough to share how the Holy was working on him. What a pleasant, honest conversation we had.

He realized that night: either that sign had to come down, or he and their congregation had to work to change their actions to align with their words.

Sadly, not long ago I drove by that church and the sign was gone. And that is ok.

You see, we need to be true to our beliefs. We need not use words to say things that aren't really true in order to attract others. That seems to happen enough in business, politics and the world around us—I don't believe there's a place for it in our houses of worship.

Often, I've seen and experienced churches that say "all are welcome," yet there are multiple unwritten caveats that go along with those words. All are welcome—if you dress a certain way, if you have a certain color of skin, if you believe like we do, if you don't do this or that, if you act or talk or think or vote a certain way.

But shouldn't the words "all are welcome" stand on their own?

What I've seen happen repeatedly is this: people believe that statement, show up in that church, get hurt by that church, and never return to any church. The church maintains its face because they welcomed people to come in—but the welcome changed once they got there. Often because they wanted the person they welcomed to conform to who they thought the person should be and not allow them space to explore who God created them to be and give them space, respect and love enough to feel safe exploring what that means.

Oh, don't get me wrong. Churches—all churches—make mistakes and learn and grow. Hopefully in a way that is more Jesus-like in their love and welcome. Maybe that's what the church who removed the sign is doing, entering the hard conversations and exploration to ensure they say what they really live. I mean, after all, isn't that who we're called to be as closely alike as possible? The one in whom we live as his namesake—Christ – Christians?

In our faith community, we changed those words from "all are welcome" to "you are welcome" several years ago. Because that feels more like what Jesus would say, and the way we believe He acted. Every individual He encountered, He welcomed into His Father's love, not judgment, and through that love they begin to find who God created them to be. He wanted everyone to experience a life of peace, love, and warmth His own Parent offered.

I hope and pray—no matter the sign you have at the entrance of your home or your church—you are striving to live it. And to live it in a manner I believe Christ came and lived to teach us all: Love, honor, and respect all God's children. All are welcome. You are welcome.

Because here's the truth: we will never welcome someone God doesn't already welcome and love.

So, the question to me isn't whether your sign says the right thing. The question is whether your life does.