

You're Welcome Here

Beside my front door there is a wooden plaque prominently displayed. It reads; "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." Depending on the day and time and who you are when you knock on my door determines whether or not it gets opened. We also have a welcome mat in front of our door. Its purpose is two-fold: first, I'm trying to be friendly to my guests and visitors by saying, "Welcome!" "Come on in," "Mi casa es tu casa"; secondly, its rough bristles serve to brush the dirt and muck off your shoes so that you don't traipse your mess all across my not-so-clean floors. All of a sudden, the messages I have at my front door are in opposition to their intention. They aren't so friendly after all. Instead they articulate; knock, and the door will be opened...if I'm home...if you're someone I want to speak with...if I'm dressed. You're welcome...but only if you wipe your feet so that I don't have to clean up after you. You're welcome here...if I open the door.

Jesus doesn't send these kinds of mixed messages. There are no conditions to be met to gain entrance into his presence. He always opens the door, no matter who you are, and no matter how filthy you are. Jesus doesn't ask us to get cleaned up before we come to him. We don't have to dress up in our Sunday best to be given access to him. Just as Jesus demonstrated his love as he humbly washed his disciples' dusty, grimy feet, so he too, bids us come and let him wash away the stench from our messy lives. He simply says, "Knock, and the door will be opened." In fact, if you don't come to him, he will come to your door. In Revelation 4:20 he says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Jesus welcomes us with open arms, and builds a relationship with us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as he reveals the Father heart of God. This is not just a visit or a temporary arrangement. Jesus offers permanent living accommodations from now through eternity. He partners with us in our sanctification process as he conforms us more and more into his image. He says to all, "You're welcome here."

How do we extend this same invitation to men and women who struggle with same sex attraction? How do we welcome sexually broken people into our church communities and love them with the same unconditional love that Jesus loves us with? How do we provide an atmosphere of grace while standing firmly on the truth of God's Word? All of these questions are timely to the age we are living in. Thankfully, the power of God is still at work today, and he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The

same God who spoke the universe into existence is undeniably able to transform lives and bring healing and freedom to all who respond to his invitation.

A recent article by Rev. Malcolm Duncan demonstrates the truth of the reality of being welcomed by Jesus. He writes, "Christ-like inclusion is seen in a Saviour who beckons all who will respond to Him to come and follow Him... Inclusion looks like a narrow road and a small gate. It looks like picking up a cross, denying yourself and following Jesus. It looks like obedience. It looks like a rejection of self and selfishness. It looks like keeping your body holy and pure. It looks like an acknowledgement of sin and dependency on God. Christian faith is not a lifestyle option to be added to the rest of our life-choices. It is a fundamental shifting of our thinking and perspectives so that we submit ourselves to Him. In all of this, it looks like hope for the broken, grace for the weak and forgiveness for those who know they need it." All of us are equal at the foot of the cross. Jesus exchanges his life for ours so that we are no longer compelled to live according to our fleshly desires. We have been made new. We are born again. Paul says in Galatians 5 "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." When Jesus rolls out the welcome mat, he invites us to start fresh, to accept our new identity in him, and opens the door to a brand new existence.

"You're welcome here" is not only an invitation from Jesus. As an extension of the body of Christ, the community of believers must also open its doors to people who struggle with same sex attraction. Recently, I was speaking on the topic of building community within our churches and I came across a beautiful definition of Christ-like community. Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Canada, wrote in his book *Community and Growth*, "The mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God...that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom." These truths are so clearly demonstrated in the New Testament account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus ordered the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb rolled away, and issued an invitation of life to Lazarus. Lazarus came out of the grave, still bound in his grave clothes. Jesus ordered those gathered around to unwrap the bindings that were

opening doors

restraining him. It is interesting to note that when Jesus ordered the stone to be moved away from the tomb, Lazarus's own sister objected. "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Thankfully, Jesus is not deterred by her objections. Rather, his objective was to give life to that which was dead. Jesus used those around Lazarus to undo his bindings, just as he calls the Christian community to come around those whom he has raised to new life and release them from their bondage.

We are compelled by Christ's love to provide a warm, welcoming environment in which the love of God can minister healing to broken lives. It means we retract the finger of judgment and hold out arms of love as we come alongside men and women on their journey to healing and wholeness. The Christian community is designed to be life giving and life affirming. It is to be a safe and healthy place to grow in relationship both with God and other people.

Sometimes, we in the church have made the mistake of insisting that belief must precede welcome and belonging, which has the effect of slamming the door on spiritual seekers. Other times, churches may offer welcoming and belonging without any need for belief and transformation. When we look at the way Jesus welcomes people, we see there are two circles around Jesus: there is an outer circle of seekers and an inner circle of committed disciples. Jesus welcomes everyone into the outer circle, regardless of their sins, and challenges them to become a part of the inner circle. Jesus never says, "You're a sinner, try harder." But he also did not ignore sin. Many times when he healed people he charged them to "Go, and sin no more." The grace of God then enters in, transforms us and empowers us to live differently.

Pat Lawrence writes in her article *Responding to Homosexuals*, "The issue of homosexuality demands a response of godly compassion from the Body of Christ...we need a response that sees the whole person." In this article Pat shares a story about a person who struggled with same sex attraction and was active in the lifestyle along with using drugs and alcohol as numbing agents: "Too many times religious people would say, 'I love you but I don't like your behaviour,' but all I could hear was 'You're worthless.' Why couldn't they say, 'I love you and God loves you.' When God spoke to me I heard simply, 'I love, I love

you.' That's all I heard and it blew me away. What could I say but, 'God forgive me for living my life without you.'" It is imperative that we as a community of Christ-followers hear and respond to the deeper things. We need to have Christ's heart of compassion and love in order to effectively reach wounded men and women and tell them "You're welcome here." Pat offers some practical advice to Christians: "We are called to be uncomfortable in order to make a difference in our world. When you care enough to draw near to homosexuals and their community, you risk a lot. You risk appearing to compromise, you risk misunderstanding. But you need to listen and discover. Be aware of cultural barriers for there is a gay culture. Laugh at yourself and ask questions." So often, we are afraid to reach out to others who have different struggles than us. It's scary to leave your comfort zone and enter uncharted territory. I'm beginning to realize that what we commonly refer to as our comfort zone is really a fear zone that keeps us trapped and limits our effectiveness in the kingdom of God. We were never meant to be confined to what's comfortable and safe. God promises us that we have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power, and love, and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). In reaching out to people who struggle with same sex attraction, we extend the welcoming arms of Jesus and provide them a safe place to find freedom and grace in their time of need.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus calls upon the community of believers to function as salt and light in a dark and dull world. It's time to hold up our lamps and light up the path for others to find Jesus. It's time to brighten up our front foyers and re-think our welcome strategies.

In the next few weeks, I'm going to work on my front door surroundings. The plaque might be moved to a new location, and my prickly welcome mat will find a new home. I'm going to find ways to brighten my doorway and front hall and make it an environment that says, "You're welcome here. No matter who you are, where you're from, and what you're going through. You're welcome here."

What Can I Do?

Pray. God works through Exodus Global Alliance when you pray. Pray that we will be effective in proclaiming that God has good news for people who experience same-sex attractions and for people involved in homosexuality. Pray that we will be effective in equipping churches to minister God's truth and grace to people impacted by homosexuality.

Give. Exodus' ministry to people depends on your financial support. Our support comes from individual donors, not institutions, company sponsors or government grants. Will you give as God directs you? Send your gift using an Exodus response card or contact the Exodus Global Alliance office.

Invite Us to Your Church. Exodus welcomes invitations to speak in churches—sharing how the Gospel is good news to people impacted by homosexuality, sharing testimonies of God's transformation and discussing how the church can minister God's truth and grace. We would love to receive an invitation from your church. You can take the first step by contacting us to say you would like us to speak in your church. We'll take the next step of contacting your pastor.