

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-17

Text: Colossians 3:10-11

Message: A Ministry of Welcoming

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Have you ever been told that you belong to the Dutch church? The comment may be wearing off a bit. But the weight in the directory is definitely on the side of names with Dutch origin.

It's true that the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and this local congregation, was started by immigrants from the Netherlands. But we are more than a group of immigrants and we are increasingly losing that Dutch identity.

To be honest, we cannot really call our denomination a Dutch church. While I don't have exact figures, a growing percentage of the denomination's congregations have multiethnic membership. Many ministers and leaders come from different ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic, Korean, and Chinese. Today, as on any typical Sunday, some thirteen languages are being used in the Christian Reformed Church. In the newest Psalter Hymnal, songs can be found in 32 different languages including French, Japanese, Mandarin, Mohawk and Swahili.

We are no longer a Dutch denomination, although we have a rich Dutch heritage which plays a big role in our identity. As a local congregation, we might not have that extensive variety in our membership. Even so, we must look beyond a shared Dutch identity to define who we are. We must not look at our differences and different people as they relate to our Dutchness. We must put our differences into the perspective of our identity in Jesus Christ.

That there are differences in the church cannot be denied nor ignored. The Apostle Paul knew there were differences in the churches in Colosse. He speaks of this in v. 11. The membership consisted of Jews and Greeks. There were Jews who were part of God's chosen people Israel. They had the history of God's promises. They knew the Old Testament and its laws. They were raised in a setting where God was important. With that Jewish background they had come to believe in Jesus Christ.

There were also Greeks in the church. These were the Gentiles or non-Jews who had come to believe in Jesus. A good Jew was brought up to thank God that he was not a Gentile. They had no background as part of God's people. There was a sharp distinction or gulf between Jews and Greeks or Gentiles.

There was a big struggle in the early church about welcoming Greeks or Gentiles into their fellowship. Even after God had made it clear to Peter with the vision of the sheet with

unclean animals and the instruction to go to Cornelius, a Gentile (see Acts 10), the church still struggled with making Gentiles feel welcome. They just were not Jews. They were different. But they were still part of the church.

Part of that discussion was the distinction between those who were circumcised or uncircumcised. Circumcision was a sign of belonging to God's people. But in the new covenant relationship through Jesus, the physical sign was not as important as the sign of belonging to Jesus, a sign expressed with water in baptism.

Paul speaks about barbarians and Scythians. This refers to people who could not speak Greek and were considered uncivilized. The Scythians were known to be brutal and considered little better than wild beasts. And they were believers in Jesus and part of the church.

Another difference in the early church was between the memberships of slaves and free people. Slaves were a lower class of society. They were socially inferior to those who were free. This was true not only among the Jews, but also in the Roman society in general. Slaves had no rights and no authority.

These differences were part of the religious and social fabric of the time of the early church. They were a real part of the daily experience and lives of the people. These differences would also come up in the church where the membership consisted of Jew and Greek, civilized people and barbarians, slave and free.

Those specific labels do not apply in our own local church setting. That's why I appreciate the way The Message presents this verse, referring to "one's nationality or race or education or social position."

In this church there are long time members whose families have been Christian Reformed for generations. And there are more recent members who come from other denominations or who are new to the faith, with little or no religious background.

There are those who wish to keep traditional practices and those who desire new and varied expressions of faith.

Some people emphasize the difference between professing members and those who are only baptized members or those who are not baptized. Some people highlight the distinction between those who are professing members of the church and others who attend, but are not members.

There is the difference between families and single members. Some people see differences between those who own their own farm or business and hired workers, between

managers and employees, between different age levels or simply between the Dutch and Canadians.

There are probably more distinctions that we could find among us. Some are more major than others. The fact is that they are present. They cannot be ignored. But they are not to be the focus of who we are. Those differences do not define our ministry or whether we welcome someone to our church family or not.

That is the point Paul is making in these verses. In verse 10 he says we have a new identity in Christ. Then in verse 11 he speaks of how our identity is not whether one is "Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free." Those differences don't define us. "Christ is all, and is in all."

"one's nationality or race or education or social position is unimportant; such things mean nothing. Whether a person has Christ is what matters, and he is equally available to all."

The value of being a welcoming church comes from setting aside our ethnic identity or employment status or family history, to focus on our identity in Christ. Ephesians 4:4-6 tells us that "there is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." 1 Corinthians 12 speaks of the many different members who are all part of the one body of Christ.

We share the same relationship with God. We become his children only through believing in him. Everyone of us was a prisoner to sin. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God--there are no exceptions. Only through Christ can we be free. It is not that some are more of a child of God than others. As if those who have been in the church longer or who have been more obedient can claim to be more legitimate children than others.

God has no illegitimate children. He has no step-children. He has no grandchildren. He has no favourites. All of us are welcome in God's family in the same way, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore Christ is all, and is in all. Sharing that common faith in Christ makes us one--one family, one fellowship, one body, at an equal level with each other. There is neither Dutch nor Canadian, employer nor employee, liberal nor conservative, for Christ is all and is in all.

How do we live and express our value or ministry of welcoming? We can celebrate and appreciate our differences and not be afraid of them. We can learn from each other about our different backgrounds and ideas and expressions. From acknowledging and understanding our differences, we can focus on our relationship to Jesus. We are a church of Jesus Christ.

We believe in one Lord Jesus who saves us from our sins. By that faith we are children of God, all one in Christ Jesus.

From that unity, we can encourage each another and welcome others from our different backgrounds and perspectives.

From faith in Christ, we may be able to better appreciate the different expressions of Christian living we see among ourselves.

So many people are searching for a place to belong and experience support and relationship. They are looking at all sorts of social groups, activity groups, support groups. Unfortunately, the church has a history and a label for being a judgmental and unwelcoming and exclusive place.

We can advertise all we want and make statements about how that's not true. But that will not be effective. People will need to experience that expression of welcome. We need to live by a value of welcome in our daily lives in our involvement in the community. Then we also need to express that sincere welcome in this building and in the Fellowship Hall over coffee after church.

It's easy to approach people who are like us, or who are already in our friendship circle. But how does the new person experience welcome? How does someone not part of your circle know that they are a valued part of the family of Jesus? How do they experience love and support and a listening ear?

It will take humility and even some sacrifice. We may have to step out of our comfort zone. We might have to admit that we have an attitude of pride or arrogance that needs to be confessed and changed. Something which may seem very important to us will have to be relegated to a lower level on the pedestal. Most important in the life of our church is Jesus Christ and relationship to him. Let that be our identity that we live. As Martin Luther said, "When a person has put on Christ, nothing else matters."

Some practical expressions of this value and ministry of welcoming include words like: invite, hospitality, equality, everyone, gracious. Or in the words of Colossians 3:12-14, the value of welcome is expressed in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, forgiveness and love.

On Sunday, and during the week, all are welcome. It means being friendly and enfolding others. It includes involving ourselves in each others lives. It's giving the message of welcome to belong to the family of Jesus.

Amen.