

8 HABITS OF EVANGELISM



**Office of Theology, Formation & Evangelism
Presbyterian Mission Agency**



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission



Copyright © 2021 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible,
copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education
of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Permission is granted to churches to reprint this resource for study and worship.
The content is not to be revised, adapted and/or incorporated into other materials
without the express written permission of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

pcusa.org/evangelism

1

RADICAL WELCOME

Shanea D. Leonard



I. OPENING PRAYER

God, who is sovereign and loving to us all, open our hearts and minds as we seek you in this lesson.

Help us to see the value in welcoming the stranger, loving our neighbor and seeing people the way you do.

God, help us to not center our own fear but open us up to the beauty of radical welcome.

And God, even when the task at hand gets difficult, give us the strength to push past the discomfort so that we may know more fully the bountiful blessings of beloved community. Amen.

II. THE PRACTICE OF RADICAL WELCOME

I can remember the first time I truly felt “at home.” I was in a setting with folks whose diversity vastly ranged in race, orientation, age, income level and background. No two people were alike in every way and yet we all felt the same. It was as if a mini United Nations was in this unique gathering space. And I must admit, it was in this particular environment that I felt a sense of self and community that I had never felt before. Within this lack of homogenous ascetic, I found what I believe many of us are looking for, a sense of belonging . . . a place of being. I felt, for the first time in a public space, real welcome. For I had found home. And this was the first time in decades of living that I truly experienced what I could later only define as radical welcome.

Radical welcome is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts,

presence, voices and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society.¹ Radical welcome is beyond the spirit of hospitality or the presence of a visitors' repass after morning worship. Radical welcome is a deterrent from the germane into a world of equity and equality for whom-ever the Lord sends to your ministry. It is an embrace of the alterity that exists in a fundamental effort to live into the mandate of *whosoever will, come*.

In radical welcome, the idea of othering someone who does not fit a dominant structure is cast out in exchange for the benignant desire to be changed and freed from the comfort zone of conformity to dominance. Radical welcome frees all who participate to let go of the mindset of us verses them. Rather, no one is the other for all are of one body with differing parts. The fear of the unknown is replaced with the excitement of embrace for the what could be. This virtue is truly the epitome of the call of the Christian to be a breach mender, a safe haven and the reflection of the welcoming love of God in the world.

I think the best example of this is clear in the dichotomy of multicultural versus intercultural. Multicultural means all are welcomed at the table and their differences are seen. Everyone is represented as their humanities are displayed for their diversity, each within their own understanding. However, interculturalism has a different approach to community. Radical welcome shows up in interculturalism not just by putting each other's differences on display but by actually taking the next step to learn about one another and to shift the narrative to create a platform that incorporates the culture, identity and sense of self of all into the life of the community.

In its most simplest form, radical welcome is the spiritual ability to see the will of God to create, foster, make room for and be an active participant in beloved community that calls us outside of our proclivity to fear and into the brave loving strength of togetherness. It is the difference between inviting visitors in your home and welcoming family. One is temporal and the other is belonging.

III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

Scripture references for the practice of radical welcome are all throughout the Bible. In fact, the essence of salvation and the reason for Christ's crucifixion are based in an idea of the radically welcoming nature of God inviting the "whosoever will" to the table of fellowship, family and faith. Our collective root narrative as Christians should always point us to a place of openness and welcome to those God places in our path. However, here are some additional Scriptures to ponder:

You shall love the stranger.

(Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

See, I am doing a new thing!

(Isaiah 43:18-21)

Those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find it.

(Luke 9:23-25)

Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.

(Matthew 25:31-46)

IV. ILLUSTRATION

When Heather contacted me via email one Wednesday night, I didn't know what to expect. She said that she had gotten my information from a community partner of the

church and was directed to me for spiritual guidance. She said that she was a 19-year-old transgender woman who was struggling with understanding if and how God could love her. She said she had been agonizing over, and was even suicidal about, the notion that God had turned God's back on her, especially given her religious upbringing. She didn't give much detail

about her story but just asked me how I could possibly help since she clearly thought if I was a minister, then I would just condemn her as well.

I opted for an alternative response. I welcomed Heather to join me, free of charge, at a conference that our church was hosting the coming weekend. I told her that it was designed specifically to address the areas of hurt, harm and disconnect between the church and the LGBTQIA+ community. I also shared with her that nothing she had told me or could ever tell me would cause our loving God to turn away. I reminded her that she was fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image not in spite of being trans but in connection to it. I also told her that I, too, was a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and that a variety of people would be attending and leading workshops who would definitely help to provide a safe and brave atmosphere for thoughtful engagement.

When she arrived that chilly Saturday morning in November, I could immediately tell it was her. No, she wore no name tag, nor was she the only transgender person in attendance. However, the look of fear in her eyes and a smile that said this may be my



last hope pointed my spirit in her direction. I admired the strength and fortitude it took for her even to get to us that day. The first thing I did was introduce myself and offer her a hug. I assured her she was in the right place, got her an informational packet and some food and helped her get settled in for the plenary. She was introduced to one of the members of the church who offered to be a conference buddy for Heather so she wouldn't have to navigate the terrain alone. She stayed all day and even came back for the second portion the following day.

Heather eventually became a member of the church and was even active in our outreach to other trans college students. She became an integral part of my ministry, being an intern for my secular job and even inviting me to do a seminar at her corporate job once she was out in the working world. Years later, Heather and I are still in contact. She is no longer suicidal. She has a restored relationship with God and is thriving in her authentic self. I truly believe that God worked through the radical welcome we extended as a church to help this young lady blossom in her sense of faith, sense of call and sense of self identity. To God be the glory!

V. HABITS FOR RADICAL WELCOME



Develop a plan that all can participate in.

Do not limit the responsibility of creating a radically welcoming space to one part of the congregation. Develop a plan for how you will outreach to communities and make sure your space is open and affirming to all and then make that a part of the mission and vision of your church. It should be the desire of the entire congregation, and not just a certain committee, that extravagant, radical welcoming is a part of the DNA of the congregation.



Don't always expect them to come to you.

One of the downfalls of folks looking to diversify their congregations is that they open the doors and expect folks to just flood in because they are there. That never works! The best way to provide radical welcome is to become a part of the community around you. Exemplify your welcome by being the salt and light of Christ outside the church walls. Connect with organizations, churches or individuals that are actively involved with marginalized communities. Do more than just seek to be a savior of the community; become a partner. Partnership is mutual reciprocity that alludes to radical welcome. This trip outside of your comfort zone is well worth it when extending radical welcome.



Reflect diversity in who leads.

Most people who are typically “othered” take notice of how they are, or are not, reflected in the make-up of those who lead in worship and in senior leadership. In order to make

sure radical welcome is tangible, be intentional about diversity and inclusion in the voices that lead your congregation.



Worship should not always be how it has always been.

Consider the style of liturgy, choice of music and elements of worship. Are they reflective of a variety of traditions, cultures and representations of people? Part of where some become stuck between attempting diversity but lacking inclusion is the rote practice of using dominant cultural ways of doing things that only uplift diversity during certain ritualistic times of the year. That is not radical inclusion. Not only is who is involved in the worship imperative, but how the worship is conducted helps to create a space that is reflective of radical welcome and extravagant inclusion.



Do your own work.

Before you look to extend the olive branch of welcome and inclusion to those who have been “othered,” make sure you do the work of acknowledging, confessing and working through the implicit and explicit biases that may exist in your congregation or group. It would be a shame to do all the work of preparing a place and then when folks show up, the welcome is rife with words or behaviors that deter the very point of welcome.



Even if not on the first try, don't give up.

Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day. You may have done all your foundational work and have created the most radically welcoming space possible, and no one shows up. And that's OK. What is key to remember is

persistence and patience. People who have felt harm or alienation may need time to see consistency before they are emotionally and mentally able to extend trust. Stay focused on your job, to be there with open arms. Leave it to the Spirit to do the rest.

VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which communities of people are absent from your space?
2. What do you feel have been the barriers to you living into radical welcome and what do you hope to reimagine for your future?
3. How have you prepared personally to engage in connection with those who have been “othered”?
4. In what ways have you practiced radical welcome in your faith community?
5. Where do you see places where your community can extend more radical welcome?

VII. CLOSING PRAYER

Loving and merciful God, help us daily.

First, to see where we have held on to a mindset that has not pleased you nor served us.

We confess that we have often operated in fear and ignorance in an effort of self-preservation and willingness to reside only in that which is familiar and comfortable.

Dear God, help us also to live into the idea of what it means to love all different types of people in the ways that you do.

Help us to see radical welcome as an opportunity for growth and not a hindrance to conservation.

God, who is a loving parent to us all, grow us into the image of Christ as we seek to see others in the same manner.

And finally, God, give us the wisdom to know that we are all merely vessels sent to do your will and be conduits of your spirit in harmony with humanity.

We pray this prayer knowing that you are faithfully pushing and pulling us into that which we are yet becoming.

And for this we are thankful.

Amen.

NOTES 1. Radical Welcome as defined in Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (Church Publishing Inc.: New York, 2006).