



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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***“It’s That Simple!”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Luke 5: 27-32; John 8: 1-11*

*June 2, 2019*

One of the things we do when we have a group of individuals participating in membership inquiry session, is we ask them what got them coming, and what kept them coming, to our church. There’s a tremendous amount of wisdom and perspective that can come from asking the newest members of our church family what their experience has been coming into our fellowship. A lot of what we hear, of course, is not a surprise. We hear about people feeling welcomed and received. We hear about the music and worship life of the church. We regularly hear affirmations of what I refer to as the ‘personality’ of our church that I think stands at the heart of the connection for members both new and old. One of the things that has surprised me over the years, however, is how often this conversation includes references to the open table – the all-encompassing invitation that we extend to all who want to join us for communion at the Lord’s table.

I am amazed, and have been especially surprised here at North Shore, about how often I hear about our approach to communion being a key draw, or a particular moment of connection, for our newest members. I’ve heard it regularly over the course of my experience in ministry, but I think I’ve heard from every group we’ve gathered here at North Shore over the course of the last four years. And, sure enough, I heard it again when I asked our current group that same question two weeks ago. I think it is especially poignant in this region, where we are notably surrounded by faith traditions that are much more restrictive in sharing the elements, but it is abundantly clear that there is something about our approach to communion that strikes home to so many who come through our doors. And, for me, it’s pretty simple – All are welcome!

Every month, as we gather around the table, Julie and I come at from different angles in our introductory words. We share different thoughts in our words of invitation each month, and we highlight different things that reflect the theme of that day’s worship, but we always end with the same phrase. No matter what words of invitation we have shared, we finish by saying, “all are welcome who come in faith...members of this church, of other churches, or of no church at all.” All are welcome! It is really is that simple!

That’s the notion that’s been ringing my mind over the course of the past two weeks. After that new member of our church family brought up the issue of the open table during our 9am session,

I came down to preach our 10am service and found myself sharing a phrase that I know I often share in the pulpit. Without getting into unnecessary detail about the content of the sermon, I started honing in on my fundamental point of the day and said, as I often do, “I know it’s not that simple!” And, even as I said those words, my mind went right back to the conversation, shortly before, about the open table.

It’s not always in those exact words, but I’m entirely aware that I point in that direction with a fair amount of regularity. I’m far too cognizant of the complexities of both this world, and the Divine, to be able to stand up here on a regular basis and offer boiler-plate resolutions with clearly delineated lines and simplistic moralities. This world is more complicated than that. The divine truth of God is so much more than that. To think that I can wrap it up in some sort of bow is just, 99.9% of the time, not something I’m going to claim to do. I spend my time pointing at elements, angles, and thoughts but own openly that I’m not providing simple platitudes that allow us to walk out the door with a ten-word answer to challenges of discipleship and faith. Life’s just too complicated for that – and I’m not going to pretend otherwise. But, it’s for that very reason that, more and more, over the course of the past two weeks, I’ve been taken by the manner in which that line, those three words, are one of the few exceptions to that rule. All are welcome! It really is that simple!

I shared the story of the calling of Levi and the stoning of the woman caught in adultery, this morning, because they are two of the many, many, many examples of the grace-filled, open, and love-driven invitation of Jesus.

- Jesus calls a despised tax collector to be one of his inner circle of disciples, and when people balk he responds, ‘If you were perfect, I wouldn’t be here. I came, because you need my forgiveness and love.’
- Jesus encounters the group about to stone a woman caught in adultery and says, ‘No, all are broken – we love her too!’
- The disciples try to stop the children, and Jesus wraps his arms around them.
- The ‘righteous’ clamor as Jesus sits to break bread with sinners and prostitutes, but he loves them to.
- He called Zacchaeus out of the tree, comforted the criminal on the cross by his side, and called out for forgiveness to the very ones who crucified him.

There are very, very, very few places in the realm of faith where I would ever use the words simple – but this is one of those exceptions. All are welcome! It doesn’t matter where you’ve come from, where you’ve been, what you’ve done, how you’ve failed, how you measure up, or...or...or... All are welcome! Why? Because none are worthy, but that’s the very point of grace! That, for me, is the inherent contradiction to the very notion of a closed table. The concept that we could somehow be worthy of it. The mindset that we could somehow deserve that grace. The consideration that we might in some manner merit the love of Jesus is, simply, patently absurd. Every time someone tried to draw a line between those worthy of God’s love and those not, Jesus laughed in the very face of the notion. We are at this table because we need this table! We come to this place because we need that love. We come to this table, each broken in our unique but real ways, and we rest in the promise that no matter what our brokenness is, we loved, we are received, we are forgiven, and we are forever held in the arms of God!

I am welcome! You are welcome. All are welcome! It is that simple!

There aren't many theological perspectives where I can't at least see the logic of the argument. I don't always agree with the logic, and the premise from which I come will often lead me to a different perspective, but I am attuned enough to the complexities of faithfulness that, more often than not, I can see how one might get to the perspectives they hold. This one, however, I just don't see. This is one where I just don't see the complexities. Jesus loved. Jesus loved all. Jesus loved all with a love that never fails. All are welcome to enter into the invitation of that love – it really is that simple!