

“To Accept and Be Accepted”

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Ex. 32:1-14

Matt. 22:1-14

[Jesus said,] “[8] Then [the king] said to his servants,
‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.
[9] Go therefore to the thoroughfares,
and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.’
[10] And those servants went out into the streets and
gathered all whom they found, both bad and good;
so the wedding hall was filled with guests.”

Matt. 22:8-10

Let us pray... O God,

We would like to accept your invitation to be accepted.

Help us likewise to welcome those you invited –
and to accept ourselves, too.

Amen

“To accept and be accepted” – isn’t that something we all want?

Those of you who are grandparents, for example –
don’t you just love your grandchildren?

And don’t you love how they love you back?

But did you ever think that maybe

the reason why ‘grandchildren and grandparents get along so well
is because they have a common enemy’ ? [Anon.] Sound familiar?

I believe we all have had some experience with what it means
to not be accepted.

‘To accept and be accepted’ –

This phrase has great personal significance to me.

I used these words in a speech I gave at high school,

when I was growing up in NJ, in a town divided by racial distrust.

These words represent to me, now, the willingness I had back then

to speak my truth in the hopes of making a difference

in the part of the world I found myself in at the time.

For a youth to have such an opportunity to speak before other students –

or in any public speaking forum for that matter, is a big deal.

Such experiences help a young person build confidence –

but young people have something to give back, too,

and that’s not just their ‘new ideas’.

They bring a fresh perspective, because all of life is still new for them.

They bring the enthusiasm that anything is possible.

They haven’t been crushed by society’s “shoulds” yet.

Willard, p.2

A friend sent me an internet video of a youth-led demonstration that took place in Tampa this week, sympathetic with the “Occupy Wall Street” protest in Manhattan.

It shows young people voicing their concerns – and their hopes for provoking change.

It remains to be seen what may result from these demonstrations whether they will do any good in dealing with our economic woes.

But at the heart of it,

there seems to be a commitment to the democratic process.

These are young people willing to take their civic responsibility seriously to exercise their 3rd Amendment right to assemble and petition the government about their grievances, but also... to express the desire that their voices be taken seriously – that they be accepted into that democratic process.

These words – “To accept and be accepted”, still ring true and seem to take on an even broader significance now – even beyond these particular current events.

They touch on the very essence of what humanity and Christianity are about and the liberating transformations already at work in the Church with a capital ‘C’ and societies throughout the world.

This kind of talk about acceptance may not seem to apply to you personally.

You may feel that you have always been accepted – and far be it from me to convince you otherwise.

But let us recognize that there are those who are isolated and alone, even to the point of despair.

This has often been true for young people and especially so for young people who are gay – or anyone who struggles with their identity.

There are young people, gay – and even straight, who give in to despair because of bullying or simply because of the rejection they feel.

As we get older, all of us face – to some extent, isolation and loneliness as we go through pain or deal with limitations due to our health, or grieve a loss when a life partner, family member, friend or even a pet passes away.

We all have to come to terms with loneliness at one point or another in our lives.

Willard, p.3

“To accept and be accepted” is in keeping with a deeper theme put forth by Paul Tillich, the classic theologian whose career began in Germany until he was exiled for his teachings in the 1930s and who continued to teach in the United States on into the 1960s. He was an effective voice that responded to the challenges of *existential* despair in the post-Depression and post-War world that said, ‘God is dead’ and life is meaningless.

To begin with, Tillich redefined “Sin” – as not simply some immoral act, but as the condition of separation...

separation from God, from other people, and within oneself.

On the other hand, “Grace” is the unearned acceptance of human beings by God, as well as our acceptance of others, and our acceptance of our own human condition.

So, we are “saved” as we accept that we are accepted.

This is really just a form of the Great Commandment – to love God and to love others as oneself.

And it is a reflection or an echo of the name of God – I Am That I Am, which is to say, “You are Somebody, too” and “We matter”.

“Sin” – as separation from God, from other people, and from ourselves has been overcome by the saving action of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. And this was accomplished by the meaning that was demonstrated in his life as someone who suffered and died as one of us, but prevailed against a meaningless and brutal death to show us that no matter what, ‘God is with us’.

Christ is about bridging that separation, that isolation, that loneliness to bring unity – ‘That they all may be one’.

To accept Christ into one’s life is to accept our connectedness with God, with all other people, with Creation itself, and with our own selves the good and the bad, all of it.

What is unacceptable is intolerance – which is in effect a kind of self-imposed prison.

To accept Christ is not limited to a religious or psychological reality, but a spiritual reality which opens up into unexpected possibilities. As we realize that we are accepted and valued and loved for who we are, that is something we can share.

Willard, p.4

You can share Christ with others by sharing something of yourself
in the process of becoming a friend.

Be a friend and you will be demonstrating the love of Christ –
so that as people come to know and accept you as a friend
they can come to know and accept Christ in the same way
without you even having to say anything.

They may not believe the same way that you do or use the same words,
but at the heart-level, just being a friend is enough.

They won't be afraid of you and you don't have to sell them anything –
just meet them at a mutual level of acceptance.

So, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, iconoclastic, atheistic, and theistic
people can meet Christ at the level of just being your friend

And in the process, you can bring about change
in that part of the world that you are in...

When you look at a cross,
sometimes there is a figure of Jesus hanging from it –
usually in a Catholic or Orthodox church.

For Protestants, the cross is generally empty
to symbolize Jesus is no longer dead, but risen.

Still another way to think of the cross
is as the outline of a person with arms outstretched,
open & affirming, accepting, welcoming, inviting us all
to join in on the great dance of the life of faith...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Exodus 32:1-14 provides an example
of the tension between religious intolerance
and self-determination as a religious community.*

- 32:1 When the people saw that Moses
delayed to come down from the mountain,
the people gathered around Aaron and said to him,
'Come, make gods for us,
who shall go before us;
as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
we do not know what has become of him.'
- 2 Aaron said to them,
'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives,
your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.'
- 3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears,
and brought them to Aaron.
- 4 He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf;
and they said,
'These are your gods, O Israel,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'
- 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it;
and Aaron made proclamation and said,
'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.'
- 6 They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings
and brought sacrifices of well-being;
and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.
- 7 The Lord said to Moses,
'Go down at once! Your people,
whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt,
have acted perversely;
8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way
that I commanded them;
they have cast for themselves an image of a calf,
and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said,
"These are your gods, O Israel,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"'
- 9 The Lord said to Moses,
'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are.
10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath
may burn hot against them and I may consume them;
and of you I will make a great nation.'

11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said,
‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people,
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt
with great power and with a mighty hand?
12 Why should the Egyptians say,
“It was with evil intent that he brought them out
to kill them in the mountains,
and to consume them from the face of the earth”?
Turn from your fierce wrath;
change your mind and do not bring disaster
on your people.
13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,
how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them,
“I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven,
and all this land that I have promised
I will give to your descendants,
and they shall inherit it for ever.” ’
14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster
that he planned to bring on his people.

Matt. 22:1-14

- [1] And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying,
[2] "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king
who gave a marriage feast for his son,
[3] and sent his servants to call those who were invited
to the marriage feast; but they would not come.
[4] Again he sent other servants, saying,
`Tell those who are invited,
Behold, I have made ready my dinner,
my oxen and my fat calves are killed,
and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.'
[5] But they made light of it and went off,
one to his farm, another to his business,
[6] while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully,
and killed them.
[7] The king was angry, and he sent his troops
and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.
[8] Then he said to his servants,
`The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy.
[9] Go therefore to the thoroughfares,
and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.'
[10] And those servants went out into the streets and
gathered all whom they found, both bad and good;
so the wedding hall was filled with guests.
[11] "But when the king came in to look at the guests,
he saw there a man who had no wedding garment;
[12] and he said to him,
`Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?'
And he was speechless.
[13] Then the king said to the attendants,
`Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness;
there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'
[14] For many are called, but few are chosen."