

The Road Less Traveled – November 3, 2017

At the beginning of most of our worship services, I make a point to welcome first-time guests. I also try to drop a note after someone has worshiped with us for the first time. In both cases, I tell them that I hope they find Aledo United Methodist Church to be a warm and welcoming place to worship God. And that hope is sincere, as I know it is for every member of this congregation.

That's why it's painful when we find out we've missed the mark.

But that's what I heard this week. A few weeks ago a couple joined us for Sunday morning worship. They came early to mingle in the Narthex prior to the service. They visited the Connection Center. They saw a lot of people. But they said the first time they were greeted was during the Passing of the Peace after the service had begun. In other words, they were inside our church for the better part of half an hour before someone spoke to them.

It was a difficult story for me to hear, and my first instinct was to be defensive -- to list all the things we do to make sure guests are made to feel welcome. And that was my reaction because I think we are a very welcoming congregation. I've been to churches that are cold and unfriendly, and that is simply not us.

But before I could offer up my explanation for why these guests did not feel welcomed, I was reminded that hospitality is not something that just happens. It only happens when it is intentional. The truth is that it is easy to ignore those who we don't know. We get engrossed in conversations with those in our church family, and a guest can simply walk by unnoticed. Or maybe we notice them, but who wants to take the chance of welcoming a "guest" who turns out to be a longtime member?

And so in the interest of intentional hospitality, I offer a few simple suggestions.

1. Never make eye contact without speaking. If you catch someone's eye, make sure you greet them. You don't have to tell them your life story. But a simple "good morning, it's great to see you," goes a long way.
2. Lead with your name. Longtime member or not, if you don't know their name, chances are they don't know yours. So when you greet, introduce yourself, and be sure and take the time to listen for their name.
3. Show new folks around. If a family is obviously visiting for the first time, help them get settled. We all know where the nursery is or where kids go for Sunday school, but figuring that out can be a daunting task for a first-time guest. If they are looking for the nursery, offer to walk them over to the Education Building. If they are looking for a Sunday school class, walk them to the Connection Center for assistance. That personal contact is invaluable.
4. Err on the side of hospitality. I think it's everyone's nightmare to welcome a "visitor" who has actually been a member for 10 years. But let radical hospitality be your default position. And if the worst happens, simply be honest. We are a growing church with multiple services, and few if any of us know everyone. And so simply laugh it off, shake their hand and say, "Wow, 10 years, huh? Well then I would say it is about time we met!"

The truth is, hospitality only happens when we make it real.

See you Sunday.