

Dear friends in Christ,

In the early days of the Church, as Paul and the others went out from Jerusalem, they would bring the Good News to people where they were. Often, the people would hear the Good News and respond by asking, "are we welcome?" Paul would bring the question before the disciples in Jerusalem when the Gentiles asked if they were welcome.

When missionaries went to what is now the British Isles and Europe, they encountered people with their own religions and traditions. When they heard the Good News, they asked if they were welcome. In our own nation, we have as a Church had native Americans, African Americans, women all hearing the Good News at various times and asking if they were welcome. The questions were sometimes asked in innocence, other times in anger. And at times those in "power" had to be shown that those asking the question were fully human, and fully children of God.

Most recently, we as a Church and a society, have been asked once more "are we welcome?" by another group of people. The gay and lesbian members of our society have heard the Good News, and want to know if they are welcome; welcome to take part in the life of the Church, welcome to receive the Sacraments, welcome to identify themselves as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are in the midst of the questions, and the discussions that go along. For some, the question has been fairly easy, but for others it has required another question, if this is a lifestyle choice, or a life given at birth?

As we have engaged the question and more importantly the people behind the question, we have as a Church come to an important realization. Regardless of what kind of relationship we are talking about, there are some basic expectations we have when it comes to living with others. We need to honor the image of God in each other, we need to be faithful, and trusting, to communicate with one another truthfully. We have discovered that we are all capable of these kind of relationships and they are not just found in traditional marriages. We have also realized that we are all capable of falling short of these expectations, regardless of the relationships we are in. This has been one of the fruits of our ongoing discussions that benefits all people.

This past week, Bishop Gunter distributed a letter that allows same sex unions and marriages to take place in the diocese, including St John's. The congregation and vestry need to talk about what this means and know where they are before this can take place, but in essence, we are now answering the question if gays and lesbians are welcome by saying yes.

This does not end our discussion. In all humility, we make decisions like these without knowing fully if what we are doing is right or wrong. We act in faith, hoping that we have used what resources are available to us in the best way possible. But one thing is clear: because we are the Church, and in particular the Episcopal Church, we act with an expectation that we are a family that welcomes people, and welcomes debate and discussion. The bottom line is that we are all God's children, and in this Church we have room to discuss, debate and sometimes even argue, while still remaining God's children, and part of God's family.

The coming weeks the vestry and I will be inviting people to share their thoughts and their stories in regards to this question. We invite all to participate. They will not be times to win people over or convince, but rather to share our stories, and celebrate the single story that envelops all our stories in God's love. In the meantime, if you would like to read Bishop Gunter's letter, please go to the diocesan website (diofdl.org) or pick up a copy in the parish office.

In God's love and mercy,
Fr David