

Belong



It's tempting to look at our new vision statement for 1st Congregational — that we would be a place where people outside our walls could come to Be, Belong, and Become — and say, *Isn't that us already? I came here and I felt welcome, and I felt like I could belong here, and I became my best self here! Aren't we already there?*

In many ways, yes, we are already a place where outsiders have felt welcome and have become a vital part of our community. But, as we shall see, there are many ways we can send the message that someone is unwelcome without even intending to.

There's a perfect example of it in the letter called Galatians in the Bible that we looked at last week. This letter was written to a group of non-Jewish Christians in the area which is known today as Turkey. This was way back *before* the days when Istanbul was known as Constantinople. But now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople. You can't go back to Constantinople. Been a long time gone,

Constantinople. Why did Constantinople get the works? That's nobody's business but the Galatians.

Anyhow, we have this angry letter from Paul, someone who was an expert in Jewish law, but had dedicated his life to helping non-Jews figure out how to be followers of Jesus without being Jewish. Paul is angry because the Galatians have new teachers who showed up and insisted that they all must be circumcised and learn to follow the 613 laws of the Torah.

And he's not angry because this is a new turn of events. He's angry because he sees this kind of thing all the time.

He tells a story in the letter about a time when a trusted church leader really dropped the ball on being inclusive. He calls this leader "Cephas," but he's talking about someone who is better known throughout the New Testament as Peter. Peter is quite the character. He's a guy who is big on enthusiasm, but not so great on follow through. He famously jumped out of the boat when he saw Jesus walking on water. But just as famously, he started to sink as soon as he realized what he was doing.

Peter is a big-deal, inspirational leader in the Jesus Movement. And Peter is not a traditionalist like the new teachers Paul is mad at – far from it. In fact, his experience worshipping with non-Jews is what pushed the Early Church to say officially that non-Jews were not required to convert to Judaism. In other words, Peter is the last person you'd expect to create an unwelcoming atmosphere for non-Jews.

But Paul catches him at it! He sees Peter "[standing] self-condemned."

The church was different in its early stages. Members of the movement lived communally. They sold all their stuff and pooled the money together. They made sure no one was in need. And, as we'll see in Paul's story, they routinely ate meals together.

There's something about eating together. It builds community almost magically. You don't share a meal with people you hate. And when you do share a meal with someone, you share a bit of yourself.

Paul, the outsider, notices something about the way Peter eats, namely that he eats with everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike. I don't know if there's scripture to support this or it's just my instinct, but I see Peter as a real gregarious guy. I see him as one of those extroverted personalities that can talk with anyone. I can see the faces of people lighting up when Peter pulls up a chair.

But things change when "certain people came from James" show up. James is Jesus's brother, and head of the church in Jesus's absence. James is a little bit more about rules than Paul or Peter are. Ever heard the expression "faith without works is dead"? That's from a book of the Bible that James wrote.

Peter must have felt the social pressure of these "people from James," because Paul notices that he is no longer sitting with non-Jews at meal times. Ostensibly, he's afraid of what the James-people will report back to James.

So Paul, being Paul, confronts Peter in front of everyone. He says, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile [a non-Jew] and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

In other words, Peter has seen the freedom with which the non-Jewish believers live their lives, and decided that it's not so essential that *he* follow those 613 laws

quite so adherently. He's taking these new freedoms made to accommodate non-Jews and says, *Thank you very much, I've always wanted to try a pulled pork sandwich.*

But that's not the part Paul takes issue with. The issue comes when Peter, though living like the laws of the Torah don't matter, nonetheless flaunts his Jewish heritage and ignores non-Jews at the first sign of social pressure. He co-opts their way of life, but shuns them once the Rule Lawyers show up. It's obviously hypocritical and clearly insensitive, but it's also a trap any person of privilege could fall into.

What makes a Christian different from a non-Christian? These days, it's hard to tell. Those 613 laws are still in our Bible, but we don't follow them. Christians live their lives pretty much like everyone else. We buy the same products, drive the same cars, work the same jobs. It's extremely rare to see us living communally as they did in the Early Church. By any conceivable metric, we live life just like any other type of person — with the possible exception of what we choose to do on a Sunday morning (but even regular church attendance is becoming a feature of a bygone era.)

Even though we're so similar, when it comes to drawing dividing lines, we can be remarkably quick to grab a piece of chalk. We proudly sit at the Christian table, even though nothing truly sets us apart. How often do our attitudes about what might be acceptable or unacceptable get in the way of the journey of a person coming into our community from the outside?

Imagine yourself at the non-Jewish table. Imagine how it feels to have Peter avoid you when "certain people" arrive. That is not Belonging.

And here's the really insidious part: Peter is not a bad guy. In fact, Peter is a remarkably good guy. Jesus said of Peter, "On this rock, I will build my church." He and Paul are the ones most responsible for building the foundation of our belief system. If a guy like Peter can screw up this bad, so can we.

1st Congregational is not a bad church. So many people have remarked upon how they feel more comfortable here than they have at any other church! But just like Peter, we are more than capable of sending a nonverbal message of, *You don't belong here.*

That's why we've got to be so intentional about being a welcoming community. If we rest on our laurels, we run the risk of pulling a Peter. But if we keep asking ourselves, *How can we make this a more and more open and welcoming community?* God will whisper in our ears when we have an opportunity to invite in those who get nervous at the sight of pews.

Maybe it goes without saying, but Christianity is no longer just a movement within Judaism. We are a full-fledged religion with faithful followers all over the world. The Church is what it is today not because of what traditionalists did, but because people like Peter and Paul opened the doors to a new type of Jesus disciple. The expressions of faith we have today, we inherited from those non-Jewish Christians. The church still exists today because of Paul and the Greek churches he founded. We are heirs of the Christians who almost got pushed out. We worship today because the Early Church opened a wide door for people from all walks of life to come in through.

So if we are radically welcoming today, what might the church of tomorrow look like? The good news is that we can be at the forefront of pioneering the church of tomorrow, as long as we take the opportunity to be radically and intentionally welcoming.

