

# Speaking of God

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## A Renewed Vocabulary for Prayer and Faith

### How to Become a Welcoming Parish

I sometimes sit in a quiet church  
allowing my eye to follow the light  
as it streams in through the windows.  
There are the smells of burned incense  
and candle wax  
and the slightly sour smell of old wine  
in the air.  
And sitting there,  
I try to imagine what the church would be like  
if everyone, *everyone*, was truly welcome there.  
Sometimes the lines of that hymn come to mind,  
the one where we sing and pray  
that all might be welcome  
within the church.  
Marty Haugen wrote this hymn. It tells a great truth.  
It envisions the church as a house  
where love can dwell  
and where everyone can find  
a safe home.  
It envisions the church as a place  
where prophets can speak  
where the truth is told,  
and where all the people of God  
can dream of God's Reign.  
Sometimes I find myself humming this great hymn  
while out working in our veg patch  
or along tree-lined city streets.  
The hymn goes on to dream of a place  
where the outcast and the stranger  
bear the image of God's face.  
The hymn speaks of the church

as that place  
where all are truly welcome.

I was humming it again  
during the last Easter season.  
Because we worship so frequently  
during the Triduum and early Easter Season,  
the many readings and stories from Sacred Scripture  
tend to swim together in our minds  
and imaginations.  
Even if you don't come to church for those days,  
you still know what's going on there:  
On Holy Thursday:  
the Last Supper,  
washing of the feet.  
On Good Friday:  
the crucifixion and death.  
And then on Holy Saturday:  
the Easter Vigil:  
the candlelight opening,  
the reading of our shared story of salvation,  
the blessing of the fire and the water,  
baptism and confirmation.  
Easter Sunday morning:  
lilies,  
fresh water,  
big crowds,  
pink and yellow spring dresses,  
new life,  
a new beginning,  
a strong sense of optimism.  
Alleluias!

There are two events in this whole story  
that swim together for me.  
The first is on Holy Thursday evening  
at the supper meal.  
What strikes me  
is that Jesus was the host there.  
And the second is the moment in which  
Jesus met his disciples in the upper room  
with Thomas doubting it all,  
hidden there behind their locked doors,  
huddled together.  
What struck me in the latter story  
was how Jesus still claimed them as his own!

I mean, these people had,  
for the most part,

run out on him in his hour of need.  
They were full of doubts.  
But to Jesus,  
it didn't matter who they were.  
Forgiveness was such a strong theme  
of his teaching and of his practice  
that none of that mattered.  
He would still eat with them  
and still invite them to the banquet:  
that fish fry on the beach in John's Gospel,  
at Emmaus in Luke's Gospel,  
after the supper, in the upper room:  
Let's get something to eat.  
In these stories, Christ is the host.  
Christ sets the table.  
Christ welcomes them all!  
In thinking about all this,  
I suddenly realized that *that's the Good News!*  
Forgiveness, absolute and total forgiveness,  
was not just one theme among many  
in the Gospels.  
It was the mode of operating  
for Jesus.

So imagine a Church where we understand  
that in Christ, all are forgiven.  
Imagine a Church where we understand  
that the table around which we gather  
does not "belong" to us.  
It is not set by us.  
We don't own it.  
It belongs to Christ.  
If we were the ones making up the guest list  
and setting out the meal,  
I suspect it would be less inclusive  
than Jesus' guest list.  
Our meal would be a little more skimpy.  
We tend not to forgive as easily,  
and to hold sins against one another.  
We tend to exclude at our tables.

But the good news is that Jesus does not.

The MO here is Christ's, not ours:  
forgiveness is in;  
holding sins against each other is out.

So imagine with me if you will,  
what it would be like

if we truly meant what that great hymn says  
that *all are welcome*.

Imagine making an announcement before Mass  
next Sunday in your own home parish,  
welcoming all,  
from the crossroads and byways,  
from the darkest corners of society,  
from the forsaken and forgotten and rejected,  
from the outsiders,  
the strangers,  
and the foreigners.

Imagine a stream of people coming into the future Church,  
led triumphantly through the doors  
by...who else? By us! The church's leaders!

"Who are you?" we might ask,  
"Are you married with kids,  
worrying for them  
and committed to their welfare?  
Are you divorced?  
Are you married for the second,  
or even the third time?  
Are you a single parent  
struggling to make ends meet,  
but also hoping to have love  
in your life again?  
Are you gay or lesbian?

Well if you are, then you belong to us  
*because you belong to Christ.*  
Christ is the host here today and Christ welcomes all!

Who are you?  
Are you lonely?  
Are you a widow?  
Are you a single man or woman  
who would prefer to have a spouse?  
Are you disabled or disfigured?  
Have you run out of luck?  
Does your life seem flat?  
Is your faith on a slowdown?

Well if you are, then you belong to us  
*because you belong to Christ.*  
Christ is the host here today and Christ welcomes all!

Who are you?  
Are you struggling financially?  
Have you been laid off?  
Downsized?

Does it seem like you can never quite get it all together?  
Well if you are, then you belong to us  
*because you belong to Christ.*  
Christ is the host here today and Christ welcomes all!

Who are you?  
Are you struggling with family planning questions?  
Have you been a victim of abuse or violence,  
of a crime?  
Are you fearful?  
Are you a criminal or imprisoned?  
Do you have a past about which you feel shame?  
Are you homeless or hopeless?  
Well if you are, then you belong to us  
*because you belong to Christ.*  
Christ is the host here today and Christ welcomes all!

Who are you?  
Are you new here?  
An immigrant maybe?  
Are you from another religious tradition?  
Are you full of doubt today, like Thomas?  
Are you fearful like the disciples were?  
Has it been a while since you darkened  
the doorway of this church?  
None of that matters.  
You belong to us *because you belong to Christ.*  
Christ is the host here today and Christ welcomes all!

All people of good will are welcome here:  
that's the really good news!  
If you've been away,  
you can come back,  
if you've been living in darkness,  
you can come to the light,  
if you haven't been able to believe without seeing him,  
look around you,  
the Body of Christ has come to Mass today.  
Sinners are welcome,  
saints, too.  
Everyone is welcome to come to Christ:

Imagine the Church as a beacon on a hill  
beckoning all to come,  
calling all to be here,  
here, the place where Grace is shared!