

I am not sure where we learn it. I am not even sure how we learn it. All I know is that we learn it. We learn it at an early age. We learn quickly who is in and who is out, who is acceptable, and who isn't acceptable.

Sometimes we learn this from our family. Other times, we learn it from our friends. Sometimes we learn it from school, or from work. But make no mistake, we learn it.

I grew up in Bismarck, North Dakota. In that predominately Northern European environment, the problem in my school wasn't with African Americans (there weren't many), it wasn't with people coming here from Asia (there weren't any), it wasn't with Hispanics (there weren't any). The race problem in my school was with the Native Americans. With reservations all around us, Native Americans received an undeserved bad reputation.

Even with that, I was fortunate to grow up in a home that accepted anyone. It truly didn't matter what the color of your skin was. It didn't matter what you did for a living, or what your parents did for a living. My parents had this uncanny ability to just welcome anyone.

However, despite the welcoming attitude of my parents, I had learned at an early age if something went wrong, you could blame an Indian. I am not really proud of this. But it is true. What is even more sad is how often I saw people get away with it.

My mom, one day, made brownies for a church event. I loved my mom's brownies. They were terrific. She would cut them up and put powdered sugar on them and oh, my, they would melt in your mouth. But because these brownies were made for a church function, my mom told my sisters and me that they were off limits. Those were her parting words as she left the house to go to work.

My sister took them out of the oven and must have seen how longingly I was looking at those brownies. Because she threatened me within an inch of my life. But as I stood over them, I noticed something. In the baking process, the brownies had pulled away from the edge of the pan about a quarter inch.

That got me thinking. And later in the day, when it was safe to wander back into the kitchen, I took a sharp knife and I could cut a straight line all the way down the side of the pan, and it looked like it had pulled away, further from the pan. I ended up cutting another quarter inch of brownie, from all the way around the pan, and had the equivalent of a good sized brownie. Then I went about my day, feeling pretty good about myself. I thought I had gotten away with something terrific.

At dinner that evening, my mom got up to get something. When she walked by the brownies, she shrieked and said, "Who cut into the brownies?" Everyone was silent. So was I.

My mom asked my two older sisters first, "Did you cut into the brownies?" "No way," they both said. All eyes turned to me as my dad asked, "Scott? Did you cut into the brownies?"

I said, "Who me? I didn't do it. Kenny did it."

Now Kenny was the little Native American boy down the street who I occasionally played with. He was always getting into trouble. If there was anything going wrong in the neighborhood, Kenny was usually nearby. I never thought at the time, that maybe he kept getting into trouble because he had to defend himself from people like me, who kept blaming him for things he didn't do. Who kept putting him down because he was different. Who kept putting him down, because we could. I don't know why I blurted his name out. I just did. It was easier to pass the blame than to take the punishment.

It didn't work. My parents gave me the punishment anyway. They let me know, what Jesus was trying to teach the people of his day, that in God's eyes, everyone has value. No one should be blamed for something they didn't do. Prejudice doesn't deserve a place for the people of God.

In our scripture for today, Jesus has called a hated tax collector to follow him. Tax collectors collaborated with the enemy. Tax collectors took advantage of people. Tax collectors sold out their faith and their heritage, all to get ahead. Tax collectors weren't liked. They were seen as collaborators who should be taken out back and shot.

Not only did he just call this tax collector, Levi to follow him. But Jesus went and ate with a group of people that the religious people felt had a poor reputation. And they called Jesus on it. "What kind of example is this? How can you be hanging out with them? Jesus, we thought you were religious, what is wrong with you?"

Now I love Jesus' response. I love it because it is a challenge for me and for any of us who like to decide who is in and who is out? Who is acceptable and who is not? Jesus simply said, "Who needs a doctor; the healthy or the sick? I'm here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually fit." Jesus, you've got to be kidding?

I love this passage, because it reminds me, especially on this day, when we are celebrating the accomplishments of those who are graduating from High School and college, when we are celebrating paying off a mortgage. When we might be tempted to sit back and say, "We've made it! Our church is going great!"

This passage reminds us that there is work to do. As long as there are people in our ministry area from Deforest, Token Creek through Sun Prairie down to Cottage Grove, as long as there is anyone in our area who is sin-sick, ***we need to be reaching out to them. We need to be inviting them to come and worship with us. We need to welcome them when they come. Why? Because that is what Jesus invites us to do, as we live our faith.***

You see, it's not up to us to decide who should be here. It should not matter to us what the color of someone's skin is, or if they have an accent, or what their sexual givenness is.

It is up to us, to live as followers of Jesus Christ. It is up to us to welcome all who come. It is up to us to invite people to worship with us. It is up to us to pray that God would send to our church people who are sin-sick, people who are longing for meaning and hope in their life, people who are going through challenges like a job loss or a divorce, and people whom no one else may want. It is up to us to welcome these people. Because it is what Jesus would have us do.

Will it be easy? No it might not be. There might be people who come that we may not like. There might be people who come who don't look like us. There might be people who come who don't dress like us or like the same music as us. There might even be people who come who sit in our spots. There might even be people who come who don't know how to get around our building. But should that stop us from welcoming them? I don't think so.

Our mission statement says *the purpose of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ . . .*

I hope that we will take this scripture and the first part of our mission statement so serious, that when we see newcomers in our building, we will help them get to where they need to be. I hope that we will take our mission statement so serious that we will see it as our task not only to welcome all people, but also to remind one another that a relationship with Jesus is to be our most important relationship.

May God help us live our faith, so others see Jesus living in us.

Amen