

I've entitled my message for today 'safe places'. I picked up a bulletin last week and read your statement 'Forest Hill United Church is a safe place ...'

We hear about 'safe places'. What does it mean to be a safe place?

What do we mean when we speak about 'safe places'? Isn't it evident? They are places where we can feel relatively safe - places where we can go, and take our mother, or our children and feel quite certain that no one will be harmed in any way - not physically, or emotionally.

Some places even give us guidelines. Movies and TV shows, for instance - contains foul language or violence; parently guidance. Some places are ADULT's only, and we know that some people, perhaps most people, will be frightened, shocked, disturbed, or disgusted by what they see or hear in those places. Other places just make us uncomfortable, nervous. Perhaps that alley that you take a short cut through on your way to work doesn't give you a bit of worry at 8:30 an, but seems an entirely different place if you've had to work late, after dark, no one around. And you get the feeling 'This might not be safe.'

Or perhaps you've made some new friends and they invite you to join them at a gathering. At first everything is fine as you are introduced around - but then, you get a feeling - perhaps by the amount of alcohol, or a wiff of marijuana, or perhaps just something that is said or the atmosphere - this is not where you feel comfortable. This is not where you belong.

But a church? Surely that is a given - you and your loved ones can be safe in a church.

Over twenty years ago my kids and I met with my sisters and their families for a holiday gathering, renting cottages on a lakeside near Algonquin park in Ontario. Three generations, including my sister's daughter and three little grandchildren. Recently separated from her husband, my niece hoped this vacation would give her children a break from the drama and unpleasantness at home. It seemed to be working for all of us. Beautiful weather, shared family meals, swimming, running on the beach, canoeing and fishing, conversations, games.

Checking out the area, I'd noticed a 'Community church' nearby; so Sunday morning I announced 'I'm going to church. Does anybody want to come with me?' I really didn't expect anybody would - or perhaps one of the adults would feel it their duty, but my seven year old grand-niece Jaz piped up, 'I'll come, Auntie Eliz.' This was a kid after my own heart - a middle kid with all the characteristics of a middle kid - friendly, out-going, eager to please, enjoying one-on-one time whenever she could get it. She chatted away as we walked over to the church and took a place in a pew, smiling and returning greetings.

Welcome from the pulpit, hymn, prayer. Before long I began to feel uncomfortable. I don't remember the exact scripture reading but the theme for the day soon became obvious - "God's Plan for Christian Families" - families which consisted of Daddy as head of the household who worked hard, Mommy who kept the home, cared for the children and prepared the meals for Daddy to come home to. And two smiling, happy children, a boy and a girl, the boy the oldest. I was questioning myself about whether I should get up and leave and how I would explain it to Jaz on our walk back to the cottages when Sunday School was announced. Jaz looked at me eagerly, I nodded my head, another child led her out to the basement.

I should have known better. I should have listened to those unsettling thoughts in the back of my mind. Instead I imagined Jaz chatting away in her friendly way while colouring a picture or doing a craft.

When I went down to get her after the service I found the teacher and the little girls gathered around her as she cried.

‘What’s wrong?’

The teacher was truly sorry - she explained that the curriculum she had been given to teach was about happy families, and before she noticed Jaz became upset and started crying because her family wasn’t a happy family. A kindly, well-meaning, volunteer with little training - and a child who was absolutely heartbroken - crushed. I gathered Jaz in my arms for a moment, then took her hand and walked out. On the way back to the cottages I tried to explain adult matters to a small child and to reassure her that she and her syblings were loved and would be cared for. That God loved them and the time would come when they could be happy again.

And I vowed that I would never again invite anybody to attend church with me unless I checked it out first and had some idea what message they might receive.

That was over twenty years ago. I thought about it last spring when we were talking about making sure my home church was a safe place for all including members of the LGBT community. Would a child feel safe to share with the teacher that he had two Dads? Would a child with her mother and grandmother be considered a family? Would the people accept a gay man as greeter at the door?

I was on the committee at Wilmot church looking into becoming an Affirming congregation. For some time we had been talking to the congregation and working our way through some of the materials provided by Affirm United. Some questions kept coming up, I shared some of them: ‘Aren’t we already Welcoming? Why upset people by making it an issue?’ and ‘What difference will it make?’ ‘People already know that ‘all are welcome’ in our church.’

So we had a series of speakers. And I think the turning point for many, and what sealed it for me, was when Gail Constello from Oromocto High School spoke with us. She runs a Gay/Straight Alliance Group at the school. She told us about some of the youth in her group, some of the problems they face, and the rejection they sometimes get from their families and their churches when they ‘come out of the closet’. It was sad. Then she told us that she had told them that she was going that Sunday to speak to a church. ‘Why would you do that?’ they ask. “They HATE us.”

That floored me. That these young people think that churches, founded on Jesus who taught

Love, would think that 'they HATE us'.

"But what if I told you that some churches were different?" She asked them. "What if I told you that some churches would welcome you." They didn't seem to think it was possible.

"What if you saw the rainbow flag by the door of a church? Or a rainbow symbol on a church sign?"

They had to think about it. A few of them came with her to our celebration last month. She told us others were interested but had basketball or band or work or were busy - like all teens seem to be.

How do they know that they will be welcome? How do they know that this will be a safe place? We on the inside know that Forest Hill and Wilmot and a few other churches in the area practice hospitality. But how do people on the outside know - unless by word-of-mouth, or seeing our signs, or checking our website. The rainbow symbol, the words Affirming. People in Fredericton, or moving here from anywhere in Canada can check our websites and see which churches are Affirming. Newcomers have told us that this is how they found our church and realized that they should check it out.

We have let people know who we are. We have said it out loud. We have come out of the closet.

We follow the Way of man who practiced radical hospitality. In a time when women were second-class and children, particularly girl children, had no standing - he held long conversations with women, and he welcomed children to gather round. In a time when people with mental illness or epilepsy, or no doubt Parkinsons were considered accursed - he offered acceptance. At a time when the blind or crippled were rejected from the inner courts of the temple, he reached out to them. When lepers were forced to live apart in separate colonies, he healed them.

We read this morning that familiar story about Zacchaeus - hated by his people because his occupation as tax collector required him to collaborate with the Romans, and gave him the opportunity to cheat his own people. Yet Jesus visited his home and ate with him.

In fact Jesus ate with a lot of people who were considered 'unclean'. This was one of the

things he was criticized for - associating with outsiders, sinners, the unclean.

Jesus painted a picture of the realm of God where all are welcome - the stranger, the outsider, the refugee or outcast; the sinner, the crippled, blind, deaf - the unclean. Jesus healed a gentile woman's child, and the slave of a Roman soldier. When asked to decide whether a woman 'taken in adultery' should be stoned to death according to the law, he helped people to realize that no one was pure and perfect, all had flaws.

Jesus' followers carried out his work. Peter learned that it was ok to eat with those considered unclean - to sit at their table and share their food. Paul preached to uncircumcised and welcomed them into his fellowship. Philip baptised an Ethiopian eunuch. Remember the story: Philip and the eunuch met on the road, and Philip shared the gospel with him as they travelled along. They came to a stream and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptised?" No doubt he was aware of the Jewish law that said that a man must be without blemish to be accepted. Philip would have certainly known that law - but he baptised the man.

Can we who walk in the Way of Jesus, fail to welcome all God's children? Or must God continue to weep for us? Until we understand the Christ, God weeps. But when we follow Jesus walls can be broken down.