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# **There's Always Room for One More**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

December 2, 2018  
Christmas Eve  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2018

Every year, after the last Christmas service has ended and all the candles have been blown out, my family and I head to the beaches of South Carolina for a little rest and relaxation. It's been a tradition ever since our boys were very young, an opportunity to decompress from all the hustle and bustle, and simply enjoy the holiday season together.

The wonderful thing about South Carolina is: it's usually about 20 degrees warmer than here, often getting up to around 60 during the day, and so we're able to get outside, take the dog for walk, go running, even play a little golf.

As you may remember, though, last year, we were hit with that "bomb cyclone," a term I had never heard before in my entire life, and suddenly, it was snowing from the Carolinas all the way up to Maine. I didn't know it could snow by the beach, much less the beach in South Carolina, but apparently it can, because we were all stuck inside for three days with nothing to do. Everything on the island where we were staying was closed. The television didn't work because the power was out. The heat barely worked because it was so cold outside. And, we had three, very cranky young men with us, none of whom thought this was a great way to enjoy the holidays.

Finally, the day before we were due to leave, we were able to get out and go to the market, but we were amazed at how bad the roads still were. In South Carolina, they just don't get that kind of weather, and therefore, they aren't prepared for it – they don't have any equipment. So, the roads were completely iced over, except for those few spots where the sun was hitting and turning everything to slush.

We realized there was no way we would get out the next morning, because the roads would refreeze overnight and be nothing but ice, and so, on the spur of the moment, we decided to leave that afternoon. We went back to our condo, packed everything up, piled into the car, including our dog, and then, we hit the road, heading north on I-95, not knowing how far we would get, not knowing where we might stay, having no real plan whatsoever.

It was pretty late by the time we reached North Carolina, and the boys were getting hungry, so we decided to find a place to eat and a hotel where we could spend the night. But, the first town we came to had no power. The restaurants were all closed. The hotels were all closed. There was nothing we could do, no place to go, no place to stay. We got back on the road, and my wife, Susan, called ahead, trying to find us a hotel somewhere.

We got a reservation about another hour north, and when we pulled into the hotel parking lot, all of us were exhausted. We grabbed our stuff and shuffled into the hotel, just wanting to collapse in our beds. "I'm sorry," the clerk at the front desk said, "but your dog can't stay in the hotel."

"What do you mean?" Susan responded. "We made a reservation and specifically asked if the hotel was pet friendly."

"I'm sorry," the clerk said. "But, we're not. Dogs aren't allowed."

"I can't leave the dog in the car," I replied, "It's below freezing outside. The dog won't survive."

"I'm sorry," the clerk said.

“C’mon, it’s really late. No one will even know we’re here. The dog won’t make any noise, and we’ll be gone before anyone else is up.”

“Dogs aren’t allowed.”

“So, what you’re saying is you don’t want us. You don’t want us to stay here.”

“I’m sorry,” the clerk said.

And, with that, we got back into the car and headed off into the night, feeling disappointed, frustrated, angry, dejected, because there was literally no room for us at the inn.

We all know what it is to feel that way, to be rejected, left out in the cold, unwanted and unwelcome. It’s happened to all of us. It could have when we were younger. We didn’t make the team, or get that role in the play, or were able to sing in the choir. Maybe it was when we were a young adult, trying to find our way in the world, and we didn’t get into that college or grad program, or land that internship or job that we wanted. Maybe it happened more recently, when we got laid off from work, or our partner came home and said, “I don’t love you anymore.”

Or, maybe it’s something we’ve dealt with our whole life because of the way we look, the way we talk, the way we act. Just last week, a high school wrestler in New Jersey was forced to cut off his dreadlocks in order to compete in a match. The young man had intended to cover his hair with a cap, as allowed by state and national rules, but the referee said no, no way – either the hair goes, or you go.

Whenever, and however, it’s happened to you, you know how painful it can be, to be told no, to be told we don’t want you here. It hurts. It really hurts, because deep down, we all just want to belong. It’s part of our human nature. We want to know there is a place for us in this world, a place where we are seen, and heard, and welcomed for who we are. It’s not about fitting in and merely seeking the approval of others. It’s about showing our true and authentic selves, all of our gifts, and talents, and weaknesses, but also our faults, and blemishes, and imperfections, and knowing there are people out there who care about us, and love us, and want to hang out with us. That’s all we ever really want in life – to know we’re accepted and loved for who we are. And, when we don’t get it, when we actually get the opposite, it’s crushing.

Jesus knew what that hurt was like. He knew what it was to be left out, unwelcome and unwanted, because he experienced it all his life. When Mary first became pregnant with Jesus, Joseph planned to divorce her quietly, before an angel of the Lord convinced him otherwise. And, not long after Jesus was born, his family fled to Egypt to avoid the wrath of King Herod, who ordered all the newborn males to be killed. Years later, when Jesus began his public ministry, he returned to his hometown of Nazareth and began teaching in the synagogue, at which point all of the people in the village, the people with whom he grew up and who knew him all his life, started calling him crazy and ran him out of town. And, of course, Jesus was never accepted by the Jewish authorities, the Chief Priests and elders, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes. They just wanted him out of the way. They wanted Jesus dead, and to make sure it happened, they handed Jesus over to the Romans.

So, Jesus knew what it was like to be an outcast, to be rejected by other people, to be dismissed and discarded. He felt the pain, the loneliness, the heartache and anguish.

But, Jesus was born so that others would never have to feel that way. Jesus came to earth to share God’s love with the world, to embody God’s grace, particularly for those who feel left out or pushed aside. Look at the assorted cast of characters gathered around the manger. Look at all the crazy people with whom Jesus spent his time. All of them were misfits and sinners, losers and lost souls, people shunned by society, unwelcome and unwanted. And yet, with Jesus, they found their place. They found a home in this world. In Jesus, they encountered someone who saw them as they were, with all their imperfections and flaws, and yet, loved them all the more.

So, no matter who you are, or where you come from, no matter what issues you are dealing with in your life right now, you are welcome here, and you are wanted here. This is God's house, and there's always a place for you. You'll be seen, and heard, and valued for who you are. You'll never be rejected, never turned away, never left out in the cold. There's always room for one more, and you belong here... particularly tonight, of all nights. For unto us is born this night in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Amen.