

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
1 August 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“Free to Be:
A Community that is “Open to All, Closed to None”
The Story of Calvary’s Inclusion Statement and How it Shapes our Vision***
Ninth Sermon in the 14-week summer series: Free to Be

*Psalm 139:113-14a; Mark 12:30-31; Romans 8:38-39; Galatians 3:28;
Acts 15:1-2, 4-15, 19-20, 22, 30b-31*

New Revised Standard Version

We’ve had an unexpected, yet remarkable example on the Olympic stage this week from one of the greatest athletes of all time, gymnast Simone Biles. She has, of course, not made headlines for gold medals but for good judgment, for trusting her intuition, for listening to medical experts, for being in tune with her body, mind, and spirit, for supporting her teammates, for speaking out about the importance of mental health and how trauma, sexual abuse, and pressure affect one’s whole being. The “twisties” – a term that describes when a gymnast gets “lost” in the air, when one’s body and mind aren’t in sync¹ – prove that the mental and physical are interconnected in powerful ways.

While there have been some critics saying that Biles should just “push through the pressure to perform,” the majority of her sponsors, fans, and fellow Olympic athletes and teammates have supported her 100%.

Just as Simone Biles has been welcomed and affirmed as an Olympic athlete this week who has perhaps a different physical and mental ability in the 2020 Olympics than she did in the 2016 games, none of us are static beings. We are always changing, internally, and our external circumstances are always changing too. And the beauty is – whoever we are, and however God created us to be, and wherever we are on our journey, and whatever “stuff” we are working through (in public or in private) – God welcomes us as we are. That’s

¹ D’Arcy Maine, “Simone Biles pulls out of individual floor exercise at Olympics, still to decide on balance beam,” *ESPN.com* (31 July 2021), accessed on August 1, 2021 at

https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/31931207/simone-biles-pulls-individual-floor-exercise-decide-balance-beam.

just the gospel truth. God loves you. Not for who you were yesterday or for who you might be tomorrow, but for who you are today.

It's the truth that the Psalmist sings about when he assumes God's love for us from our creation, *"For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."* (Psalm 139:113-114a).

Directly before these lines, in the same song, the Psalmist asks, *"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say,

"Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."

(Psalm 139:7-12)

God is always with us. We cannot escape God's presence or love – whether we can feel it or not – and a lot of times, I'll

admit, it's a struggle to even know God is present or listening or caring but faith invites us to trust that God is there. Here. With us.

It's the same truth that the apostle Paul testifies to in Romans when he argues that nothing (not anything in life or death, nothing in the present or the future, no power or ruler) – nothing – can separate us from God's love.

And it's the same truth of being bound up by the love God that reveals that we are all one in Christ, as Paul writes in Galatians. These categories that used to define us – that used to tell us our status and power and place in society – whether we were Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – while these categories may describe our place in society, they no longer define us – we are defined by God's love as seen in Christ. And that love makes us one. Not one of us is better or worse than another, we are all equally God's children.

This is a hard thing for us to accept – especially in our world where we want to rank and score and judge each other by our actions, our behavior, our performance – but God does not

keep score because love is beyond a rating system – it is reality. Love is not concerned with our differences or even our disagreements, its concern is the divine image that lives in each one of us – and that we see in each other – and whether or not that is being honored.

This is why, as we see in Mark's gospel, that when push comes to shove and people need to know "what it means to obey God," to "follow the commandments," Jesus says love God with all that you are and all that you have – heart, soul, mind, and strength – and love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:30-31) That's it. When you strip away all the other fancy theological language and debates about faith, the bottom line is that we are to Love God. Love others.

You see, our first four scriptures today, remind us that God loves us for who we are because of whose we are (God's child). What we do or don't do is secondary. What we believe or don't believe is tertiary. If you ask me, the Bible is one long, up and down, twisting and turning, narrative about people trying to understand who they are, who God is, and what it means to be loved by God. And sometimes we see glimpses of the biblical

characters figuring that out – and when they do, it inevitably leads to them loving others and accepting others. That's just the way love works. Fully love yourself and accept that God loves you, and you'll find yourself loving others – even people vastly different than you – because love begets love.

And I'm not talking about romantic love here or friendship love, I'm talking about love as a state of inherent acceptance and affirmation and genuine concern. If I love someone – then I care enough to listen to their story and I care if they are being harmed or hurt in any way. Sometimes I think that when we struggle to love or understand other people – whether that's because they are a different faith than us, or they live a different lifestyle than us, or they have a different education or upbringing than us, or they love in a different way than us or express themselves in a different way than us – sometimes I think that that struggle is really more about what is going on in us – and our growth in learning to love and accept ourselves fully as we are (and that God loves us) – than it is about the other person we are struggling to understand or accept. I think we just

sometimes project our own struggle of self-love on to them. Many not always, but many times.

Because if God got worked up about whether someone was gay or straight or educated or uneducated – I feel like we'd see evidence of that. But instead, we see evidence of God creating us with all kinds of difference and calling that good.

So far this summer in our *Free to Be* Series on Baptist identity, we've looked at our Old and New Testament Foundations, the four Baptist Freedoms, and the two Baptist ordinances. Today we zoom in and look at things closer to home, beginning with a decision that Calvary made in 2011 that picks up on last week's theme of Church Freedom and our ability to make decisions as a local church body as we see fit and as the Spirit leads.

In today's Acts' text we see a very clear, concrete example of how the early church made a decision when there were differences of opinion. And it wasn't just any decision – it was a decision about who to include and how to include them. Circumcision is a very personal subject – you could say it's as

personal as who or how one loves – and yet this is what people were discussing back then. Other people's body parts and what they did with them and whether or not what they did with that body part made them acceptable for Christ's church.

Many of you know the story of Acts 15. Some Jews who were followers of Jesus wanted Gentiles who were followers of Jesus to also be circumcised – because that was their tradition and custom – but other leaders felt it was unnecessary.

Now it's only natural, that some leaders in the early church – and faithful leaders at that – who had good intentions for the growth of the church based on their past experience, well it's only human that they struggled with the idea that all the sudden non circumcised people could join the community. It was so foreign to *their* experience. But as Paul and Barnabas showed them through some discussion and debate, but mostly through a lot of personal testimony, the Spirit works in ways beyond what we know. In fact, if God's Spirit only worked in ways that we were used to or that we grew up with or that made sense to us – it probably wouldn't be God's Spirit, would it? God's Spirit –

the Spirit of Pentecost – is a Spirit of wind and fire and breath and shaking things up.

What I love about the Acts 15 passage is that the whole assembly is silent as they listen to the personal testimonies of Petr and Paul and Barnabas describe the ways that they have seen God move through Gentiles, through non-Jews. And it is the stories of others that moves James, one of the leaders of the “Gentiles must be circumcised to be ‘in’” movement – to discern that maybe Gentiles do not have to be circumcised after all...that maybe that’s not the most important thing after all.

Even more, it’s not just that a decision, seemingly by consensus, was reached, but that they actually decided to appoint leaders to go with Paul and Barnabas to deliver this message to the congregation of all the Gentiles – who rejoiced at the decision – because their very lives were at stake! And I’m sure there were those who were not celebrating this decision. Their reaction is not recorded in scripture, but rarely is the minority voice or perspective preserved when we write history, is it?

Maybe those who dissented or disagreed accepted the decision of the majority – of those who had discerned and deliberated about this for so long – maybe some of them left and never came back and went to a more traditional Jewish congregation that kept requiring circumcision.

We don’t know. What we do know is that the story that Luke tells us in Acts 15, is the story that shaped the early church the most – it is a story of decision making based not solely on scriptural debate or tradition and theology – but rather, largely on *personal testimony* of how the Spirit was working in people’s lives. But this is, very “Acts-like” after all – the whole book of Acts – the whole story of the early church is about how God’s Spirit is expanding hearts and minds to ensure more and more people are included. It would be an interesting exercise to go through the book of Acts and re-write every story of expansion and evangelism and inclusion to be a story of exclusion and being closed off.

Like if the 3,000 souls at Pentecost, hadn’t been baptized because their spirit-filled experience that day wasn’t enough – they needed to pass a theology test. Or like if Philip

had said to the dark-skinned Ethiopian Eunuch (a sexual minority because of his castration) – nope, not gonna teach you scripture because I don’t know you, and nope, not gonna baptize you because we’re not near a proper baptismal font. Or like if Paul had just said, “Okay I’m arrested and in prison, I guess my ministry is over” instead of singing and sharing of God’s love – and by his example inviting the person who jailed him into the love of God through Christ. (Acts 16). I mean the book of Acts is one long “welcoming and affirming” statement for so many people who otherwise were being excluded or looked over.

In fact, being radically inclusive is not easy – it means constantly seeing what we’re not already seeing, listening to voices we haven’t yet heard, be willing to let go of what we thought we knew to take hold of an expanded truth that God is showing us through the experience of other people.

So today I want to share one example from Calvary’s own recent history of how we, like the church of Acts 15, made a decision to include more people. It’s the story of how Calvary

became “officially” a welcoming and affirming congregation (of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Plus community) – **and** it’s an ongoing story of how we continue to grow into this identity and vision today. It’s not a one and done vote; being welcoming and affirming is a lifelong spiritual practice – for us as individuals – and as a church.

So, before diving into the history, I’ll read you the Inclusion Statement that came as a result of the process I’m about to share with you. It is also printed on the cover of your Order of Worship: *Calvary welcomes and affirms people as children of God from every cultural and religious background, sexual orientation, family composition, level of physical and mental ability, level of economic means, race, age and gender.*

You may think – yeah, of course – this is who Calvary is. And it is, and to some extent, it always has been – but putting something in writing does two things:

- 1) It communicates to the people who have been excluded, clearly and unequivocally that

they are welcome and affirmed just as they are for who they are. This is especially essential to people in the LGBTQ+ community, but really in all marginalized communities. The Church (big C) has gone to great lengths throughout history to exclude the LGBTQ+ community, so now, today, welcoming and affirming churches must go to great lengths to counter that exclusive message with one of love and inclusion. No one is going to drive by a Baptist church, sadly, and assume that we welcome and affirm people who are gay or trans. Putting it in writing means we are serious about it.

2) Putting an Inclusion Statement in writing reminds all of us, long-time members and new members, what Calvary has committed to – that we are welcoming and affirming – and it holds us accountable to make this statement more than just words on a page. Without a written statement, we could easily get comfortable falling back into old patterns or ways of being – unintentionally or intentionally – without committing to push ourselves to always be embodying the love of God in ways that might be challenging to us at times.

So if you were here in 2011 you may remember the process of how we got to our Inclusion Statement; if you were not here, you'll get a quick glance back to this pivotal year which really has shaped our community in significant ways.

What I'm sharing with you is from my own memory, and as recorded in our most recent history book, *We are Calvary: A Congregation of Commitment 1881-2016*, by Kathy Smiley, with editing by Charlotte Million and historical research by Maggi Susman, Carolyn Weese, and a book which would have not happened without the vision and passion of Mary Hulst. If you haven't read it – check it out from the library. It's a really good read. And it will inspire you. What I'm sharing with you comes from the last two chapters, Chapter 19 – *Breaking Boundaries* and Chapter 20 – *Travail and Commitment*.

In May 2008 the pastoral search committee called an extremely qualified, experienced, educated, out-going, and warm, pastorally sensitive candidate for senior pastor – the Reverend Brian Henderson, along with his wife Tara and their two young daughters Ana and Naomi,

(their son Joel was born in September of 2009).²

Due to some unforeseen circumstances and the movement of the Spirit, the pulpit committee had a second recommendation – and in July invited the Reverend Anne Jernberg (now Scalfaro) for a visitation week at Calvary as a candidate for pastor. Brian and I were asked to review each other's resumes and meet in person to consider the possibility of a shared ministry together, sharing pulpit time and pastoral care duties and other leadership responsibilities. Needless to say, our meeting went well, and so did my candidate weekend at Calvary.³

Brian and I both began at Calvary as in September 2008, three weeks apart. We shared three years of growth and ministry together as a church under Brian's senior leadership.

As Kathy Smiley documents, "The second half of 2011 was Pastor Brian's most challenging period as he led a charge for Calvary to adopt a statement of inclusion to welcome and affirm all of God's children regardless

of sexual orientation into the church community and membership. His conviction that such an action must occur ushered in a period of [some] division in the church and [also] a life-changing crisis of identity for [him]."⁴

"Calvary had been for many years before 2011 an open and affirming church in practice, though not in written policy. Mary Hulst preached more than once on homosexuality and inclusion, including a 2000 sermon in which she said, *"The problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scripture that appears [at times] to condemn it, but rather how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ. I don't think it can be done. The love of Christ is the principle by which we are called to live."*⁵

So the seeds were planted with Mary's leadership and members who were gay participating openly and freely in Calvary's ministries. However, Brian and I had pondered together when to bring the discussion to a congregational vote to make our welcoming and affirming stance

² Kathy Smiley, *We are Calvary: A Congregation of Commitment 135th Anniversary Edition 1881-2016* (Denver, CO: Calvary Baptist Church of Denver), 2016: 139.

³ Smiley, 143-144.

⁴ Smiley, 146-147.

⁵ Smiley, 147.

more official so that it was clear to the LGBTQ+ community. We knew that it's one thing to accept it in practice, it's another thing to put in writing; we also knew that there would be some who did not feel comfortable with putting a welcoming and affirming statement in writing.

As we had discussed this on and off, the time to bring it up actually came spontaneously. In May 2011, Calvary welcomed a guest to the pulpit – Philip Gulley, a renowned Quaker minister and author of 20 books, including works on progressive theology. Though Brian and I had no idea he was going to do this, Gulley's sermon directly addressed homosexuality and the church's call to welcome and affirm the LGBTQ+ community.

In fact, while Gulley was preaching, Brian caught my attention across the chancel and mouthed to me, *"I want to introduce the final hymn,"* even though the plan was for me to do so. I knew in that moment the Spirit was stirring, because you know how we all are about plans up here on the chancel – we always know who is doing what!

Brian gave an impromptu, Spirit-led challenge and call to Calvary to address fully welcoming and affirming the LGBTQ+ community at Calvary. The Philip Gulley sermon was a spirit moving moment for Brian and it was a defining moment for our church that in some ways, we did not see coming, and in other ways, was the natural next step for who we were trying to be as a community that remained opened to God's leading.

Council discussed Brian's challenge and, in July 2011, unanimously passed a motion to proceed. A series of congregational conversations on homosexuality and the Bible, theology and tradition, and sharing of personal stories were planned, and five forums were held in August and September, with 131 people in attendance.⁶ The discussion at these gathering was open and honest and full of emotion. Many more conversations took place with members sitting with Brian and me telling us their personal stories about their loved one who was gay or their own varying expressions of gender identity or sexual orientation, as

⁶ Smiley, 148.

well as conversations with people who simply didn't understand why we needed to have an Inclusion Statement at all. It was an intense 9 months of conversation – in hallways, in meeting rooms, in pastor's offices, and yes, conversations with God too.

In those early gatherings, Ninety-three individuals then responded to statements regarding their level of approval as to whether or not Calvary could publicly state its practice of being welcome and affirming, with 66 percent stating, "I agree;" 17 percent saying "I have reservations but believe we should move forward;" 6 percent responding, "I have serious reservations but would not stop Calvary from proceeding;" and 11 percent stating "I disagree."⁷

"The Council discussed the results of the responses and considered suggestions and edits to the draft statement of inclusion. [Many statements from other churches across varying denominations were looked at as examples.] On December 4, 2011, a finalized statement was presented for a congregational vote, which

passed with a 74 percent majority: *Calvary welcomes and affirms people as children of God from every cultural and religious background, sexual orientation, family composition, level of physical and mental ability, level of economic means, race, age and gender.*"⁸

"December 4 was an historic day because we chose to state overtly a commitment that many congregations will not make," Pastor Brian wrote in his 2011 annual report. "It was also historic because we made a decision while recognizing that not everyone would be in agreement. In doing this, Calvary demonstrated the strength and the best of our Baptist heritage."⁹

I remember December 4 very clearly, and unlike Acts 15, there was not immediate rejoicing. Not a single person clapped when the results were read, even as $\frac{3}{4}$ of us had voted in the affirmative. And we didn't celebrate because we knew that beloved people in our congregation who could not affirm the statement were upset and that some would leave our church. It was an historic vote that many of us wanted to

⁷ Smiley, 148.

⁸ Smiley, 148.

⁹ Smiley, 148.

celebrate loudly and proudly right then, but we knew that being *Open to All, Closed to None* meant living together with theological tensions and disagreements and trying to always listen and hear one another out. We would celebrate the historic nature of the vote on later occasions as we became more involved in the local Denver PRIDE festival and as we have saw more LGBTQ+ members and allies finding a spiritual home at Calvary, and many Calvary members finding a language to now accept their child or grandchild or neighbor or sibling in a new way.

“The vote of the Calvary congregation was an affirmation but, for Pastor Brian, the challenges of the past months had exacerbated a profound personal struggle – confronting his own suppressed/hidden sexual orientation. Brian had, over the years, found himself in the role of support-giver for many people going through their coming-out processes.”¹⁰

“The way I handled the pain of repressing the reality within me [that I was gay] was trying to believe that God’s plan for me was to be there for others,” he

later said, adding that the months of watching Calvary struggle with the issue had, at first, made him more determined to remain closeted. “I didn’t want to hurt the woman to whom I was married, my children, my family’s image. I didn’t want to hurt the family I grew up in. I was scared as to what it would mean professionally. All of that led to a spiral of depression.”

“After realizing that living his life in denial would be destructive to his integrity as an individual of God’s creation and as a member of the clergy, Pastor Brian took the arduous steps of coming out to his wife and a few Calvary staff members. The process did not relieve his depression; he required a six-week leave at the beginning of 2012, followed by a three-month medical leave during which he was treated for depression. In June, he announced his resignation.”¹¹

“Brian Henderson preached his final sermon at Calvary and had communion with the congregation on July 1, having served as senior pastor for three-and-a-half years. Both the members who knew the full

¹⁰ Smiley, 149.

¹¹ Smiley, 149.

story behind their pastor's depression, and those who did not, were saddened by the resignation" of such an incredible leader and pastor.¹² It is an understatement to say that this was a very hard time for Brian and for Tara and their kids and for our church family as well, and honestly, for me as a leader of Calvary and pastor and friend to the Hendersons as well.

I was immediately named interim senior pastor, and the promise of God's presence and the collective call for strength and courage arose as key themes in worship as we navigated the stormy waters of multiple staff transitions and the grief and anxiety that inevitably follow such loss. Much like Simone Biles vulnerability this week, Brian and Tara's openness with the congregation about the difficulty and darkness of depression invited our congregation to look at those vulnerable and tender places in our own lives, which we often hide from one another. I was moved by how Calvary responded pastorally to the Hendersons throughout the spring and how we began to talk about depression and our mental

and emotional health with honesty, openness and vulnerability as a congregation.¹³

"Many supportive Calvary friends traveled alongside Brian Henderson during the difficult times, and he found a place at Calvary's mother church – accepting the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Denver in November 2012."¹⁴ First Baptist is known for its commitment to social justice and the equality of all people and Brian is living into his calling and vocation in beautiful ways at First. And Tara has also lived beautifully into her calling as a local church pastor in Ohio.

So that is the story of Calvary's Inclusion Statement: a story of theological and biblical study, congregation discussion and discernment – including dissent and celebration, and lots of personal story and testimony. And those of us that led though that time, Brian, and yes, even myself as I supported Brian and Tara through Brian's depression, coming out, and resignation while also leading Calvary in the midst of a lot of transition and change – we were deeply affected by the vote and

¹² Smiley, 149-150.

¹³ Smiley, 150.

¹⁴ Smiley, 150.

the process that led to this Statement, and the Statement deeply affects our vision and ministry today. Sometimes, oftentimes actually, being inclusive of others means that being insightful and introspective about one's own journey and life. It's not easy. It's hard work. But worthy work. It is the work of Christ – the journey of community and of following the Spirit together.

We are Baptist, so while some left the church because of the Statement, others stayed even if they voted no, because it is not a creedal statement that we make anyone ascribe to to be a part of our community. So if it's not something everyone has to believe – what is it? It's a commitment that our church has to the theology of being welcoming and affirming, even if individuals within the church are not. This means our Council decisions, staff decisions, how we lead and how we engage in ministry, who and how we ordain – all these things take into consideration this statement. It is a values-guiding, statement for our church at-large, even as differing members may interpret it in

their own way or perhaps even disagree with parts of it.

Now, more and more, people join Calvary *because of* our Inclusion Statement – but it's not just because of being open and affirming to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus Community – of saying to them you are beloved just as God created you – you may love who you feel called to love, and live into the gender expression that is most authentically you – I mean, that is key and important and led to the Statement being created in the first place – but everything else in that Statement matters too:

Calvary welcomes and affirms people as children of God from every cultural and religious background, sexual orientation, family composition, level of physical and mental ability, level of economic means, race, age and gender.

Interestingly, the first new ministry we started after the vote on our Statement of Inclusion, under the leadership and organization of Mary Hulst, was Bootstraps and Blessings¹⁵ – to meet a growing need we

¹⁵ Kathy Smiley, 150.

were seeing in Southeast Denver for people who were experiencing homelessness, or living in their cars, or without adequate employment who needed a place to do their laundry, to take a shower, to have a listening ear, and to find additional resources, including a food bag and food and gas cards. Bootstraps is a welcoming and affirming ministry of those who are housed or unhoused, employed or unemployed, mentally and physical healthy, or mentally and physically ill. Our guests come in with amazing stories to tell. And we serve them and welcome them.

Then in 2016, we had another milestone in living into our Inclusion Statement by ordaining our first openly queer person – Rev. Dr. Arther Lee Tredwell.

Calvary's vision to be *Open to All, Closed to None* is never finished. We are constantly working on ways we include and make God's love more accessible to people in the way that they need to receive it. That sometimes means doing things that we don't understand or need ourselves, for the sake of others who might need it.

There are many places where our eyes have been opened, and changes made to be more inclusive of people in varying life circumstances and with varying personal identities and expressions. Often we did not even know these were ways we were being exclusive or not as welcoming as we could be – until someone pointed it out to us – and we were like – “*Oh yeah, that would be hard if I was “such and such...”*” Examples of this include;

- Putting a changing table in the men's restroom and not just the women's restroom; what an idea – dad's change diapers too!
- Adding more handicap parking spaces – an entire lot actually!
- Creating handicap spaces in the pews for people in wheelchairs to be close to their family members or friends not in wheelchairs
- Naming the two restrooms across from the youth lounge as gender neutral restrooms
- Printing large print hymns for people with different vision ability or with arthritis who cannot easily hold a hymnal
- Upgrading and updating our hearing assistance devices for people who need something that works to amplify sound with or without their hearing aids

- Changing how we do photo/video releases for people with children who are in the foster care system (whose children's pictures cannot be on the internet) or with individuals seeking religious asylum who cannot have their names/faces on the internet
- Bringing in an extra pair of hands through an assistance aid in our children's classrooms when we have a student who has special needs
- Robing on Sunday mornings, which has theological and ecclesiological meaning, but is also sensitive to female clergy who often receive more comments about our bodies and hairstyles and clothes than our male counterparts
- Allowing people to say "no" to serving on ministries or committees (with no shame or guilt or questions) if they need to just "be" and "heal" a while at our church; many people in our pews have experienced trauma of some kind in churches – and it may take years for them to be comfortable joining a church or being fully involved in the same ways that you or I might be; we even changed our bylaws a while back so that people who are not official members of the church can serve in various ways – which is important because a lot of our regular attenders consider Calvary their church home and they have distinct reasons for not being an 'official member' – ranging from their affiliation with another faith tradition, to past church trauma, to just taking their faith journey at their own pace
- Training people on technology – especially this last year during COVID – and providing people with tablets or access to technology so they could stay connected (shout out to Pastor Morgan who spear-headed this important ministry of inclusion during an almost exclusively digital time)
- Printing and emailing the enews to people without internet and Pastor Mary sending letters and notes continually to our VIPs to be inclusive of those who are not always on email or who don't always have access to that mode of communication
- Upgrading our giving to include text message giving and QR code scanning – so that giving is accessible to new generations who do not carry cash or check books
- Bill Warren and Lori Grohskopf making all kinds of upgrades in our building – not least of which was updating all of our webcasting equipment so that when you are not here with us in person – you can worship with

us online in a meaningful way (we have super active members who do not live in Denver!)

- Gradually changing our forms and documents at Calvary to include spaces for people to indicate their pronouns – something that we are always in the process of updating
- Providing Gluten-free communion wafers for those with celiac disease or dietary restrictions
- Providing vegetarian options (and now, more and more) vegan options at our potlucks because heaven forbid someone be excluded from a Baptist potluck!
- Making more and more of our meetings and classes zoom accessible for those who do not live in Denver, who cannot come to church for health reasons or because of their work schedule or because of other circumstances
- Providing COVID comfort-level stickers so that those who are not quite ready for a hug or a handshake are as comfortable as possible in our community spaces

Honestly – I could go on and on. There are always ways – weekly it seems – that we are learning how we can be more welcoming and affirming of people in all

different life situations and circumstances. So while our Inclusion Statement came out of a need and desire to speak directly to our LGBTQ+ siblings so that they know they are welcome here with us just as they are and can bring their spouses and partners and families – it reaches beyond that to so many more aspects of our life together.

And when *you* see a way that we could be more inclusive of someone – including yourself – let us know. We always evaluate these ideas to ensure that being inclusive of one does not create exclusion for another – but more often than not – it doesn't – it just creates more opportunity for us to learn and grow how we can love one another more deeply through listening to one another's needs. Someone else's need may not be our need – and we may not understand their need – but if we can accommodate it – and help them feel as welcome as possible – we are extending the love of Christ to them in significant and profound ways.

It is not easy to be welcoming and affirming of all different kinds of people in various stages of their lives. We miss the mark a lot, but each time we do, it

gives us an opportunity to grow. We are not perfect, but we do seek to be present to all who come through our doors and all who we feel God calling us to minister alongside. I encourage you to be patient with us as a church, and to be patient with yourself, as we all struggle to be more open and accepting of others. But also – push yourselves, and push us as a church, when you see ways that we are falling into comfort over and above gospel-challenge.

If there is anything that I hope you've learned in this series so far, it is that *we* are the church – each and every one of us together – and your voice, your experience – matters.

Kathy Smiley concludes her reflections on our church history in 2016 by writing: “*We may not have known [all of Calvary’s members over the last 135 years] or even remember their names, but they are with us. We are indebted to those legions who came before – who prayed, worshipped, planned and worked; who laughed and cried and upheld each other through tragedy and rejoiced together through triumph [and who made difficult decisions]. The church*

was built on their sacrifice and foresight. Future generations will likewise be grateful for the [faithful] workers [and visionary prophetic voices] of today. Past, present and future, we are all Calvary.”¹⁶

Amen.

¹⁶ Smiley, 160.