

**Kelly A. Fryer. Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church
from Its Lutheran Core.**

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Chapter 4. Everyone Is Welcome

NO LINES, EVER

Guiding Principle #2 for those of us who are God's people, through Jesus ... who also happen to be Lutheran ... has to be this: **Everyone Is Welcome**. Jesus, the Lord, welcomed everybody, especially the foreigners, the excluded, the sad and lonely and hurting. In fact, that got him in trouble with the religious leaders of his day more than almost anything else.

The truth is, none of us deserves to be welcomed or loved by Jesus. We know that we are right with God only because, in an astonishing act of grace, God came down here to meet us. God didn't draw a line and say, "I'm coming for you and you and you. But you, over there, you are out of luck." If God didn't draw a line, why do we think we have the right to draw one?

The ONLY people that Jesus ever lost his temper with were the people who went around drawing the lines. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Jesus yelled. "For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 23:13). Jesus on the other hand, threw the gates of heaven open to anyone who would enter. "There will be more joy in heaven," Jesus said, "over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons!" (Luke 15:7).

As long as Jesus is Lord, there can be NO lines. Not because it would be mean if we didn't welcome everyone. Not because I say so. But because the God we know in Jesus says so. And Jesus is Lord.

SOME MORE LATIN

Luther was a remarkable man. He unchained the Bible, translating it into a language that ordinary people could understand. He opened up the worship experience to everyone, insisting that people be able to sing and pray in their own language. He made sure that everyone had access to both the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He put the highest possible priority on educating everyone, even children, in the basic truths of the faith.

But Luther was far from perfect. He had a terrible temper and a pretty foul mouth. He ate too much and probably sometimes drank too much, too. He said some pretty terrible things about women. He wrestled with depression. The horrible things he wrote five centuries ago about the Jews were used, in this century, to justify the most outrageous and unforgivable actions taken during World War II.

If we started drawing lines to let some people in and keep others out, I would be hard pressed to know which side Luther would be on. Luther has helped us understand that we are *simul justus et peccator*. This is a Latin phrase that means that we are simultaneously saint and sinner. We have been set free from sin, but are up to our ears in it all at the same moment. We are saved, but we need, every single day, to be washed again in the waters of baptism and set free all over again.

A MOTLEY CREW

We are a motley crew, we Christians. We are so amazingly holy, and we do so many remarkable and courageous things. And at the same time we are, every single one of us, such a mess. We are just as likely to run as to stand, to lie as to tell the truth, to gossip as to give. We are careless and selfish. Who would want us?

Well, Jesus does, because Jesus loves sinners. And that makes all the difference. Jesus opens his arms up wide, upon that cross, and he welcomes all of us – every single *simul justus et peccator* one of us.

Every single one of the people who followed Jesus, back in the days of the Bible, knew exactly why they were there. It wasn't because they were better than anybody else. It wasn't because they were smarter or more faithful or more well behaved. It was only this: Jesus had welcomed them, with open arms, just as they were.

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD // THINKING THINGS THROUGH

1. Read Luke 18: 9-14.

What made Jesus really mad in this story about drawing lines? With which character do you identify more?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians who were arguing about who among them was the best. What does Paul point out to them? What do you think they did differently as a result of what he told them?

3. Have you ever felt that God is taking you places you are not ready to go?

4. Have you ever been made to feel unwelcome?

5. If you think about the disciples and other people of the Bible as real people, with flaws like ours, how does this change the way you feel about yourself – or your church?

6. How welcoming is our church? Can you think of someone who would NOT be welcome here? What can we do to change that?