

Experiencing & Extending God's Welcome
January 11, 2015
Luke 14:7-15

This morning's Scripture reading is Luke 14:7-15. I will be reading from *The Message*, which is a contemporary paraphrase. The text is also printed in your bulletin if you would like to follow along.

He (Jesus) went on to tell a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said, "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.' Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

"When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, 'Friend, come up to the front.' That will give the dinner guests something to talk about!

What I'm saying is, "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

Then he turned to the host. "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbors, the kind of people who will return the favor. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks.

You'll be - and experience - a blessing. They won't be able to return the favor, but the favor will be returned - oh, how it will be returned! - at the resurrection of God's people."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these ancient words.¹

Let us pray. Help us to see Jesus in each and every person we meet, and to welcome all people with radical hospitality. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

¹ Luke 14:7-15, *The Message*.

What in the name of God is going on here?

This is a question you will hear me ask many times in the weeks ahead. I begin this morning as I did with the children – with welcome.

I imagine many, perhaps even most of you have a welcome mat outside the front door of your home. It is a sign to all who approach your residence that they will find welcome within.

Newcomers to communities of faith are usually not looking down to read words on the door mat; they are looking up and all around to take in the sights and to observe the expressions of the people.

For those of you who have not visited a new church in quite a while, let me assure you that it can be an intimidating experience. I could put our first time visitors on the spot right now and ask them about their experiences. Thankfully, I know better than to do so.

Instead, let me tell you about three of my own recent experiences as a first time worship visitor in unfamiliar churches. Despite solid preparation and a detailed review of church websites, I didn't know quite what to expect. In some cases I wasn't sure what most people wore or how welcome outsiders really were.

Church #1. I was greeted at the door by a smiling person and given a program. No one talked to me as I made my way to a seat. I sat in silence for several minutes until a man approached and asked question after more personal question. I felt as if I was being interrogated. He then reported his findings to a pastor who then came over and said a quick "hello" and a rather pro forma "so glad you are here." No one else ever spoke to me.

Church #2. As I drove into the parking lot I saw people wearing vests who guided me to a choice parking spot and directed me to a nearby building entrance. Once inside more folks wearing vests welcomed me and directed me to the sanctuary. Just outside those doors I was handed a program. I left having never spoken to anyone apart from those in uniform – people who were appointed to be friendly.

Church #3. As I entered the church I was greeted warmly by a smiling person who handed me a program and said, "It is such a blessing to have you here with us today." Several people of varying ages came by and introduced themselves to me before worship began.

They all seemed genuinely thankful I was there and wanted to meet me. A few asked if I had any questions about the church or shared with me why they loved their church. One even said if I was new in town he would be glad to help me find my way or get settled.

These memories and your own recollections of visiting churches for the first time clearly communicate that each and every congregation offers a unique welcome. The initial welcome you receive has the power to draw you in and make you feel at home or to isolate you and increase your anxiety.

This congregation – Fort Myers Congregational – is a part of a tradition called the United Church of Christ – a denomination known for its extravagant welcome. This part of our shared identity is critically important to me as it was one of the reasons I initially became interested in the UCC.

While I had long known that the United Church of Christ existed, I was motivated to learn more when television networks refused to air UCC commercials. NBC and CBS found the content too controversial.²

Some of you will remember the series of ads that started the television portion of the Still Speaking Campaign. The very first ad of all is called “Bouncer.”

The commercial shows a diverse group of people making their way toward a church only to be stopped at a red velvet rope controlled by bouncers dressed in black. While many are allowed in, others are not including a gay couple, several minorities, and a man in a wheelchair.

The screen fades to black and with up tempo music in the background viewers read these words:

Jesus didn’t turn away people. Neither do we.

Finally the announcer says

The United Church of Christ. No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you’re welcome here.³

² Alan Cooperman. “Two Networks Bar Religious Commercial” in Washington Post, Dec. 2, 2004.
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26458-2004Dec1.html>>

³ The 30 second TV commercial “Bouncer” can be viewed at <<http://youtu.be/hx1u1v7hAtY>>

The unthinkable really happened back then and still happens today: some churches are only willing to welcome people who look like or believe like or live like they do.

If that reality bothers you, then you are in the right place this morning. We have work yet to do.

I have barely scratched the surface of explaining what welcome often is and what welcome should be. I need to clarify, however, that whatever welcome is it is not merely a way to be polite. Welcome must be our response to God's welcome in the stories of our sacred text and in our own lives.

Consider a few examples of God's Welcome in the Bible . . .

1. Strangers bring God's welcome. Think for example of three strangers who give Abraham and Sarah news that they will be parents within the year despite their advanced ages.⁴
2. God welcomes all & God's welcome is always available. Recall the recurring story of the Hebrew Bible – "God welcomes the wayward Israelites back into covenant again and again."⁵
3. God's welcome changes people. When Jesus shared the good news of God's welcome fishermen dropped their nets and followed him into a new way of living.⁶

And recognize that we experience God's welcome in our everyday lives when . . .

- others reach out to us &
- when we receive an unexpected second chance &
- through forgiveness.⁷

More personally, I am receiving God's welcome in my life through you. While I have only been your Transitional Pastor for a few days and was just formally welcomed into the role earlier in this service, I have already received welcome after welcome. For this, I give thanks.

⁴ Amy G. Oden. *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Pilgrim Press, 2008), p.35. This story appears in Genesis 18.

⁵ Ibid. p.35

⁶ Ibid., p.36

⁷ Ibid., p.37-46.

I am also thankful that a few years ago this congregation voted to become an Open and Affirming Congregation. Earlier this week Florida became the 37th state to embrace God's welcome for all marriages. While local newspapers have printed many accounts of this change, the beauty of God's welcome for all marriages struck me time and time again through social media. There is nothing quite like wedding pictures followed by more wedding pictures – especially when you know how long some couples had to wait to become legally married.

There are so many more stories of welcome that need to be shared. I encourage you to share some of yours over coffee later this morning and in conversation throughout the week.

This sermon is the first of a five part series on the characteristics of fruitful congregations based on a book by that name written by a United Methodist Bishop. I invite you to join me each Tuesday afternoon as we look ahead to that Sunday's characteristic. Your story telling will help me better understand who we are as a community of faith, and some will find their way into that week's sermon.

So here we are . . . tackling the first characteristic: radical hospitality. I would like to think most of you would give us high marks on this characteristic considering the Bishop's criteria for success:

“All churches offer some form of hospitality, but Radical Hospitality describes churches that strive without ceasing to exceed expectations to accommodate and include others.”⁸

As we live into this calling we might encounter angels or others might perceive us as angels.⁹ Jesus goes even further by suggesting that in welcoming others we welcome him.¹⁰

Our Gospel lesson certainly emphasizes the radical part of radical hospitality when it comes to advice for both dinner guests and dinner hosts. In expanding our welcome we become a blessing and we experience a blessing.¹¹ In so doing we begin to answer the question: What in the name of God is going on here?

Amen.

⁸ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon Press, 2007). p.21.

⁹ Hebrews 13:2

¹⁰ Matthew 25

¹¹ Luke 14:14, *The Message*.