

An Extravagant Welcome  
February 9, 2014  
Hebrews 13:2

Our Scripture reading this morning sounds like something from the book of Proverbs, but is actually found in the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

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

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

A few weeks ago at the Board of Church Life and Growth, Sheila invited those present to participate in an imaginative activity. Then, a few days ago, she led the deacons through a similar exercise. Both groups were tasked with imagining an ideal worship experience.

Each person wrote down what he or she envisioned, and then we shared our thoughts with the group. Most of the ideas focused on the worship service itself. People long for a service that they perceive to be inspirational, innovative, and joyful. In fact, you may recall those very words from last week's message on passionate worship.

But, the exercise also asked participants to imagine something else: the experience a first time guest has driving onto the church campus and walking into a church sanctuary in preparation for worship. The welcome people receive is important. It sets the tone for all that follows.

As for my experience . . . I can honestly say I never once sought out an ideal church much less an ideal denomination. I do, however, want to share one part of my story that differs from the rest.

From the time I went to seminary on, I always served in parish ministry. When I sought out a new position, my process of discernment considered my gifts and passion along with the need of a given congregation. Denomination wasn't a factor.

Then things changed. For the first and only time, Susan and I sought out a church to call home not so that I could minister but rather so that we could be part of a community of faith. We chose a congregation that was a part of the United Church of Christ. We made the decision for many reasons, but a part of what initially attracted us to the denomination was the language the denomination uses to describe itself.

The United Church of Christ is known for being a denomination of firsts that is

- multicultural and multiracial<sup>1</sup>,
- open and affirming<sup>2</sup>, and
- accessible to all<sup>3</sup>.

Additionally, the UCC is known as a just peace church<sup>4</sup> that offers an extravagant welcome<sup>5</sup> and practices radical hospitality<sup>6</sup>.

As follower of the way of Jesus, this is exactly the kind of community I always yearned for. The UCC was speaking my language - using words that connected with me.

I won't try to unpack what all of those terms mean this morning, but will reflect on what it means for those of us who belong to this body we call the United Church to be a people of extravagant welcome who practice radical hospitality.

When it comes to welcoming the newcomer – the one who is a stranger to those who may greet them – churches often do a rather poor job. In fact, many congregations have a ministry of greeting or welcoming that looks a lot like Wal-Mart.

For years, Wal-Mart greeters have stood dutifully beside the entry doors to welcome shoppers to the shopping experience. These greeters are easy to identify because of where they stand, what they

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<sup>1</sup> United Church of Christ. "Multicultural and Multiracial Church."

<<http://www.ucc.org/men/multiracial-and-multicultural.html>>

<sup>2</sup> United Church of Christ. "Open and Affirming in the UCC." <<http://www.ucc.org/lgbt/ona.html>>

<sup>3</sup> United Church of Christ Disability Ministries. "Accessible to All." <<http://www.uccdm.org/a2a/accessible-to-all/>>

<sup>4</sup> United Church of Christ. "A Just Peace Church."

<<http://www.ucc.org/justice/just-peace/old-site/a-just-peace-church-1.html>>

<sup>5</sup> United Church of Christ. "We are People of Extravagant Welcome"

<<http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-people-of-extravagant.html>>

<sup>6</sup> United Church of Christ. "Evangelism Resources." <<http://www.ucc.org/vitality/evangelism-resources-for.html>>

wear, and how they act. You know they are being paid to say hello, and don't expect anything more.

When you visit a church for the first time, the most common welcome you receive looks a lot like a Wal-Mart greeting. Often the greeters are in uniform. Sometimes they wear vests, in other congregations they wear special name tags, and in yet others they wear matching shirts. Whatever the outfit, you expect to encounter them near the entry doors as you make your way into the facility as you head for the sanctuary. These people are not being paid with money, but are set apart in a volunteer role as the official greeters. Just like the Wal-Mart greeter, they are there in an official capacity – assigned to cover the door and say hello. The only real difference is that these greeters may actually shake your hand.

While there is nothing wrong with Wal-Mart style greeting, it differs significantly from the over the top welcome provided at the Ritz Carlton. At the Ritz-Carlton, employees, not just designated greeters, are involved in making guests feel welcome. They do so by providing what the company calls three levels of service:

1. A warm and sincere greeting. Use the guest's name.
2. Anticipation and fulfillment of each guest's needs.
3. Fond farewell. Give a warm good-bye and use the guest's name.<sup>7</sup>

If you were paying attention you noticed that their welcome isn't something provided at the door upon arrival, but rather an experience that lasts as long the guest's stay. At both the start and end, there is an expectation of a personal, genuine greeting using the guest's name. And, in the middle is what really sets the Ritz-Carlton apart: anticipation and fulfillment of each guest's needs.

This is anything but a one size fits all approach. There are countless stories of the amazing ways individual employees have helped guests. Ritz-Carlton Vice President Diana Oreck oversees the training that helps employees to excel in this area. She says:

It's very important because legendary service is about surprise and delight. It's not robotic, it's not scripted. Golden nugget: You cannot give legendary service if you're on autopilot.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Ritz Carlton. "Gold Standards." <<http://corporate.ritzcarlton.com/en/About/GoldStandards.htm>>

<sup>8</sup> Ashley Furness. "Ritz-Carlton's 'Radar On - Antenna Up Mantra Key to Legendary Service.'" <<http://happycustomer.stellaserice.com/2012/11/07/ritz-carltons-radar-on-antenna-up-mantra-key-to-legendary-service/>>

At the Ritz-Carlton all employees know to have their “radar on and antenna up” at all times. When they see an issue or anticipate a situation in which they might help, they are empowered to make a difference. Every employee is able to spend up to \$2,000 per incident to help ensure a guest has an outstanding experience.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps I have said enough about for-profit businesses. The two examples I offered take very different approaches. While not discounting the important work done each week here at United Church by those who serve as greeters, I hope we can agree that hospitality is a ministry for all not just those standing at the door.

In inviting us to be a church that practices radical hospitality the United Church of Christ suggests that we:

Greet visitors when they come, visit with them after the service, and most of all, remove the unnecessary barriers that keep visitors from making that second visit.

Offer to pray with the guests before they leave. This often opens the door for God to work and for the guests to notice that God is concerned about them as well.

Not be overly pushy. This can push people away.<sup>10</sup>

Our version of “radar on – antenna up” means that we have our eyes open to see those in our midst who are new. It requires that we are willing to step outside of our comfort zone. It invites us to remember that we are not doing this because it is a way to prove that we are good members or involved participants, but because we are ambassadors of God’s welcome.

So, just what do we mean when we speak of Christian hospitality? Letty Russell, a longtime professor at Yale Divinity School, offers this explanation:

In the church we often think of hospitality as what the women offer after the worship service on Sunday. We do not think of this as a form of ministry but rather assume it means “tea and crumpets.” In other contexts, the idea of hospitality is reduced to sexual services offered by “ladies in the night.”

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Reiss. “How Ritz-Carlton Stays at the Top.”

<<http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/30/simon-cooper-ritz-leadership-ceonetwork-hotels.html>>

<sup>10</sup> United Church of Christ. “Evangelism Resources.” <<http://www.ucc.org/vitality/evangelism-resources-for.html>>

Although hospitality is a form of Christian spirituality and is basic to the biblical message, the practice of the biblical injunction for hospitality has fallen into disuse in our churches and society. Hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis. Such action is not easy.<sup>11</sup>

She also reminds us that throughout Scripture we are called to practice hospitality to "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" and to in so doing to be reminded that at one time we were all strangers who received God's welcome.<sup>12</sup>

Hospitality is all about welcoming the other – the stranger – the one we do not yet know. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks<sup>13</sup>, a professor and the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, explains it in this way:

I used to think that the greatest command in the Bible was "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." I was wrong. Only in one place does the Bible as us to love our neighbor. In more than thirty places it commands us to love the stranger. Don't oppress the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger – you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. It isn't hard to love our neighbors because by and large our neighbors are people like us. What's tough is to love the stranger, the person who isn't like us, who has a different skin color, or a different faith, or a different background. That's the real challenge. It was in ancient times. It still is today.<sup>14</sup>

It is a challenge I hope you will accept. It is an important part of our mission as we seek to "Celebrate God's Presence and Serve All People."

It requires that we affirm the proclamation of the United Church of Christ: "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

All are welcome, and all must play a role in making others feel welcome.

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<sup>11</sup> Letty M. Russell. Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference (2009), p.13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Sacks. "About Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks." <<http://www.rabbisacks.org/about-us/>>

<sup>14</sup> Russell, p.101-2.

Extending radical hospitality here on the grounds of our church campus may well mean that God will bring to us people that don't look like us, don't act like we act, and who have yet to encounter much less accept the Way of Jesus as the guide for living life well. It will also mean that living out hospitality may start here on Sunday mornings, but must extend into the rest of our week as well.

The popular author Max Lucado who has a way with words, brings the heart of this morning's Scripture reading home when he writes:

Long before the church had pulpits and baptisteries, she had kitchens and dinner tables. Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. The primary gathering place of the church was the home.

The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can't be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.

. . . When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to me and to God." You may think you are saying, "Come over for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort."<sup>15</sup>

Friends, please do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Max Lucado. *Outlive Your Life* (2010), p.55.