

“Extravagant welcoming”

June 26, 2011

Text: Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18, Matthew 10:40-42

I.

Our message this morning is about welcoming; it’s about extending the extravagant welcome that we talk about all the time in our denomination, *the United Church of Christ*.

The assumption behind the *extravagant welcome*, of course, is that there are a lot of people in our communities—around our state and our country—that don’t feel they would be welcome in many churches.

I always wonder what a person is thinking the morning they get up and decide to attend a church for the first time. Are they seriously worried about how they will be received ... if it will be a pleasant or unpleasant experience? Are they anxious about being rejected in some way?

Are they worried, perhaps, about being too different. In the way they look ... the way they talk ... or about what they do or do not believe. People have these questions and concerns.

*Will I be accepted at church with all my doubts?
Will I be accepted if people learn too much about me?
Am I going to be too different to fit in?*

I’ve always believed that people come to church for a reason. They’re looking for something. Seldom do people just wander in having not thought it through or checked us out in some way.

II.

You may remember the story about the town drunk in who was down on his hands and knees one night beneath the street light—searching on the sidewalk for something, searching, searching. On his way home, the preacher from the nearby church happened to see him:

Sam, what are you looking for down there on your hands and knees?

Oh, Reverend, good to see you. I’m hunting for my keys.

Well, show me where you dropped them and I’ll help you find them.

Yea, well I lost them over there in the grass, right over there (he was pointing about thirty or forty feet away).

Well, Sam, if you lost them over there, why are you looking for them over here on the sidewalk?

Because this is where the light is, Reverend.

In spite of how ridiculous this story seems, there's an element of truth to it isn't there? People look for things where the light is. To some extent, that's why people come to church: they're looking for the light:

- The light of love and kindness ...
- The light of forgiveness and acceptance ...

They're looking for a fresh word from the Lord, for a light of hope and renewal and optimism about the future. People come to church seeking to experience the light of God's ways; they come seeking the wisdom and guidance of God's purposes.

With this in mind, how we welcome people in the Church is important. Always, it's important that we pay attention to the ways we include or exclude.

III.

Our scripture reading this morning from Matthew's gospel suggests—in direct language—that when we welcome anyone representing Jesus (i.e., any believer seeking to spread the gospel message), we welcome him ... and that when we welcome Jesus, we welcome God.

As is always the case in the Bible, the context is important. Earlier in this same tenth chapter, Jesus gives his disciples a course on what might be described as **Discipleship 101**. It's all about toughening the disciples' spirit for the rough times ahead. Although we never hear the word mentioned, the task before them is revolutionary. The Jesus movement is a movement to change the world.

Jesus is sending the disciples out, therefore, to spread the word, to share the gospel. He's sending them out to cast out demons and heal the sick. But he knows it's going to be tough—that there's going to be opposition.

There will be points along the way where they'll be rejected or persecuted. Their lives may well be in danger. Therefore, they will need to toughen their spirit, deepen their sense of commitment and resolve. And again, it will not be easy.

It's in this context, after they've come through the challenging waters of **Discipleship 101**, that Jesus says to them—straight away:

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

The word from Jesus is a clear mandate to be welcoming and inclusive of all people. When we think about Christian hospitality, the bar is set high. To reject any human being—who comes seeking a deeper experience of God or a closer walk with Jesus—is to reject Jesus himself and, therein, to reject God.

IV.

In many ways, our *extravagant welcoming* is an act of love. It's an act of healing as well and an act of grace. How can we truly BE the Church of Jesus Christ and *not* do our best to be welcoming and inclusive of all people.

One night, a minister of a church in North Carolina was leaving his church at the same time a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous was adjourning.

On his way to his car, he soon found himself in conversation with a man who had been at the AA group meeting. Introducing himself and the pastor of the church, immediately the man started talking about how he needed to *get back to church* (of course, we pastors hear these sorts of comments all the time).

Naturally, the pastor invited him to worship ... whereupon the man immediately launched into a story of his life. His was a typical story, of course, with the usual long list of regrets and losses that accompany addiction. The pastor prayed with him briefly and then they parted ways.

However, as the man approached his automobile, he glanced back at the pastor and, with an apparent sense of urgency, asked him:

Did you really mean what you said? Did you really mean I could come to this church?

As the pastor drove home, he realized that the man wanted to share his life-story as a way of explaining why he wouldn't be welcome at his church.

Oh, you won't want me, look at my life!

No doubt he was convinced there was no way he was good enough or deserving enough.

The truth is, when it comes to church, all the time people worry about fitting in ... about being accepted and wanted. *Will there be a place for me? Will there be a place for my family?*

With this in mind, part of the *extravagant welcome* is about showing as much sensitivity as we can to a person's context; to what the person seems to be about; and to be as good a

listener as we can to whatever message the person might be sending out.

V.

One of the unique things about our church and about *the United Church of Christ* is that we really DO believe what I articulate at the start of every worship service:

**No matter who you are or where you are
along your life's journey, you are welcome here.**

We mean this; we really do. I only hope we are able to convey this to our visitors in the way we welcome them to our sanctuary and—hopefully, eventually—into the life of our church family.

Every human being is a child of God, a son or daughter of God. There's an equality in that statement that is unconditionally affirming of all people—even people who are convinced they will be rejected and are undeserving of God's grace.

The compelling film of some years back, **Dead Man Walking**, is about the relationship between a convicted killer on death row and a Catholic sister who serves as his spiritual director. In a scene near the end of the movie, it is the final evening before the scheduled execution. All appeals have been denied. There's an eeriness in the evening air.

In this final conversation, they are revisiting all that has happened—the horrible crime he committed, its impact on the victim's families and the readiness of the convicted killer to face death. In the midst of these very honest and sobering remembrances, the Catholic sister reminds the convicted man:

You are a son of God. Don't forget that! You are a son of God.

Some moments pass before the convicted murderer comments, ***No one has ever said that to me before. Plenty of times I've been called the son of something else, but never a son of God.***

VI.

My guess is, friends, is that there is a lot more to our welcome than we, at times, might realize. Our welcoming really does send a message—hopefully, a message of love ... a message of acceptance and healing, a message of kindness and friendliness.

Think about it: we never know what any person walking into our sanctuary on Sunday morning might have been through. We never know about their past experiences ... about their possible rejections and bad church experiences. We never know about their losses

or sheer bad luck. We never know what pain or deep trauma a person may have been through. We don't know.

And what do they know about us? If they've checked us out, they might know a few things. But until they have experienced us first-hand, how do they really know?

How we welcome and greet people every day is important. It's the way we share our humanity ... and the way we share the best that is in us.

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky was interviewed before the second game of a particular playoff series. His team had played horribly in the first game loss. The interviewer asked if his coach had shown the players their mistakes on film in order to make the necessary changes for the next game??

Right away, Gretzky responded NO, that his coach hadn't done that. That rather than show them their mistakes, their coach showed them highlights of some of their best games where they performed well. Why reinforce negative images? They needed to see themselves as they *could be* ... not as they had been.

Our *extravagant welcoming* helps all people see ourselves as we could be.

- It helps us to a more positive experience of God and to a more positive sense of who we are as a son or daughter of God.
- In our *extravagant welcoming*, God's grace pours over us in unimaginable ways ... and God's church is infinitely blessed.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

***O Lord, said the Psalmist, I will sing of your steadfast love forever.
With my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.***

Let our *extravagant welcome* go out. Let it go out, indeed. And let the people come!

All praise be unto God. Amen!

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