

June 23, 2024

Sermon Title: Widen Your Hearts

Scripture: 2 Cor. 6:1-13

Theme: Extravagant Welcome, Reducing obstacles and restrictions in our gatherings

“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!” This is the primary statement of “open and affirming” (ONA) congregations in the United Church of Christ, following a long tradition of what has been called “extravagant welcome.” This tradition applies not only to the UCC but to the Congregational churches that preceded it. It occurs during the first part of any worship service, where people greet each other in the name of peace. Theologically speaking, the passing of the peace extends a radical and wonderful welcome to visitors and members alike. The message of ‘peace be with you,’ is often followed by the words: ‘we are glad you are here.’ I served two yoked congregations in Smith County, Kansas, one UCC and one Disciples of Christ; both would pass the peace as a greeting and welcome. With regard to my UCC congregation, at one point during COVID-19, instead of shaking hands, or patting on the shoulders, we would cross ourselves to each other at a distance, signifying the type of welcome that ignores gender, social class, or ethnicity.

It is the intent of our scripture for today to sound the rewards of such extravagant welcome. “our heart is open wide to you; there are no restrictions in our affections ... open wide your hearts also. (2 Cor 6:11-12). Mother Teresa gives us these words: “Our work is to encourage Christians and non-Christians to do works of love And every work of love, done with a full heart, always brings people closer to God... the biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity.... Love to pray, since prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God’s gift of [God]self. Ask and seek, and your heart will grow big enough to receive God as your own.” Mother Teresa (1928 – 1997).

In Romans, 12:13, the Apostle Paul describes a type of individual and collective personality that is ‘given to hospitality (*philoxenia*: love of strangers) KJV.’ The Greek word translated ‘patience’ (*makrothumia*: *longsuffering*) can also be expressed as ‘great soul’ or ‘large temperament.’ Hebrews 13:2 poses the possibility that by showing hospitality we will ‘entertain (*xenizó*: receive stranger as a guest) angels unawares.’ (KJV) in much the same way as we entertain Jesus by tending to the needs of the ‘least of these’ (Mt. 25:35-45: sick, in prison, naked, a

stranger, hungry, or thirsty).

“What a welcome we received in Thessalonika! Paul writes. Word had traveled quickly to other parts of the Greek and Roman world. “When you come to the Church in Thessalonika,” you don’t feel like a stranger; you feel at home.

“You received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit ... the word of the Lord sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place your faith in God has become known .. the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome (*eisodos* entrance, way of entering, reception, manner of entry) we had among you and how you turned from idols to serve a living and true God.” (1 Thess. 1:6-9)

Paul greets the church in Thessalonika with powerful opening words in his letter. “God has chosen you, brothers and sisters, because you received our message, not in word only, not in spoken language only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in the way in which we presented the gospel to you, as we shared deeply our lives, our very inner beings, with you as a part of that gospel (2:8). Paul writes: “We were gentle (*népios*) among you like a nurse (*trophos*) tenderly holding her children in her arms and caring for them (v7), ... we deeply cared for you.” In other words, Paul says, we walked the talk. We showed you what the gospel looks like in practice. We had empathy for your situations and experiences. We put the gospel to work in your community.

The Apostle Paul refers in his greeting to the special welcome he received from the church in Thessaloniki using the words ‘what kind of welcome (*eisodos*: reception, means of entering) we had among you.’ This calls to mind the French term ‘*entré*’ sometimes used in ministry to describe a ‘manner of entering’ into a parishioner’s residence. This language implies a type of unguarded welcome extended to clergy during times of sorrow or grief that may entitle them in these special situations to visit the grieving relatively unannounced. The implication of welcome is that, when we pass the welcome, we are relatively unguarded, vulnerable, in our welcoming. We are willing to share our stories and ourselves in a sacred space and listen to the stories of others as well.

It’s an intentional practice of hospitality. And, even though the practicing of hospitality may be different in every situation, still it’s the same in the sense that we are able to develop a growing sense of confidence that we can make a difference in someone’s life through providing welcome. A consistent practice changes the heart. Through imitation of the disciples, imitation of Paul, faith

becomes more and more real, more and more genuine. A large part of the practice of hospitality is having a positive joyful attitude. And Joy is often contagious. I think of what led Philip to share the good news with the Ethiopian minister: ‘how can I understand unless someone guide me?’ Philip welcomed this person to faith while bouncing along the road in a chariot in which the two of them sat alongside each other. God had a hand in what they were doing. God had a purpose for calling Philip to be in the right place at the right time, to join the chariot in route. Extravagant welcome is hard work. Double timing it down the road to be in place for the meeting. Such work pays off in the spreading of God’s word.

Paul writes: “what a welcome we had among you!” Not unlike Paul, we should be excited about who is in this place that we should meet today. Who has God led here to meet me at this time? And, it’s scary to go into a place where you do not know if you will be accepted or not. But everyone can have a hand in making you welcome, just as God also has a hand in doing so. There is a certain grace that appears when God meets us in a certain place, on a certain pew, sitting beside us. We might call it a Holy Spirit moment, when grace is poured out in the pews, not unlike when the wine is poured into the cup at communion, changing us in the pouring, welcoming us to the table. God in Christ has made us feel welcome. Indeed, a part of this welcome is the comfort provided by the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Nurturing Spirit.

Those who are invited, in turn, become inviters, inviting others to come and see, come and see what is happening. Invitation is a two-way street. As Paul discipled the Thessalonians, so they discipled others who came there. As we imitate Paul, and the disciples, we become disciples to others. This is how we “go forth” to make disciples of all nations, to serve a living and true God.

The place where we meet in worship is a safe place, where we can feel safe and be safe. God provides protection to what happens in the place where we worship. The intentional design of worship is to create a home fire where all can worship safely together, where everyone can belong and feel as if they belong. No one is alone; no one is a stranger. If we feel love, we will give love. Hospitality is a gift of God, but a gift that we can develop more deeply if we desire to do so, to the extent that we practice it.

On the secular and religious calendar, June is referred to as Pride Month. This is the month in which the LGBTQIA+ movement celebrates and promotes their dignity and equality as a social group, opposing shame and social stigma with pride. On Wednesday, March 27<sup>th</sup>, MOSAIC will host a worship service at 6:00

p.m. for the community celebrating PRIDE month.

“If you are young or old, you are welcome; If you have brown skin, black skin, white skin, or any color of skin, you are welcome; If you are married or single, you are welcome; If you are gay or straight, you are welcome; If you are transgender, you are welcome; If you are a man or a woman, you are welcome; If you cannot hear or see, you are welcome; If you are rich or poor, powerful or weak, you are welcome; If you believe in God some of the time or none of the time or all of the time, you are welcome; Come with your gifts, your pain, your hope, your fears; Come with the traditions that have helped you and hurt you; Come with your experiences that have made you and broken you; Come with a mind, ready to engage, and a heart, open to discern; Come and listen for the Sacred Spirit that calls you to love your neighbor wholeheartedly, seek justice, create peace and practice compassion; You are welcome here!”

Hospitality requires work; practice never makes perfect. God has a hand in how we meet the moment. And it's NOT always comfortable, but it IS always beneficial. We can make a difference in a person's self-worth by being present in the moment, a welcoming presence in a welcoming place. Worship may be the only place where someone gets to feel welcome and safe from the world. So its very important to provide this welcoming place on Sunday morning. And it's a challenge to be persistent in the practice. It's a daunting task, not to fade into the woodwork, but to move out into the welcome space. The challenge is to overcome the knowledge of the past with the possibility of the future, to overcome what has gone before with what may happen in the future. The host and the guest give birth to each other, reversing roles one with the other.

The prophet Ezekiel declares: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” (Ezek.16:49) This biblical verse reminds us that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24) recorded in Genesis comes about because the cities lacked hospitality. Hospitality is hard-work, and is rewarded with longevity and peace.

Theologian Richard Kearney notes that the word ‘*hospes*,’ from which we get our word ‘hospitality’ has multiple meanings revolving around ‘host, guest or stranger.’ He writes “the self and the stranger give birth to one another.” The ‘uninvited visitor’ (in the stories of Job, Abraham, Mary, and others) to our homes or churches may be the one that surprisingly changes our life with ‘alterity.’ When we provide a radical welcome to our visitors on Sunday morning, we are also helping ourselves

to find that special space (Isa. 14:30, *betach*: ‘to be safe and to feel safe’) where we each can ‘be heard’ and ‘be felt’ before we speak. Popular author, Cheryl Richardson, writes: “People start to heal the moment they feel heard.”

Jesus once asked Philip (John 14:9) how he could have been with the disciples for such a long time and yet failed to feel as if he were part of the group. He was asking a question as one who sees from a distance rather than one who sees up close. He was asking as one who was spying from behind a tree, rather than one who is experiencing what he is seeing. A modern metaphor might be what some of us experience when our eyes are dilated at the eye care center; for about 15 minutes or so, we see our environment up-close-and-personal, as if we are in the picture we are seeing, seeing ourselves inside the frame of our viewing. As the dilation wears off, as our eyes come slowly back to normal vision, we again have a feeling of being distant or apart from what we see. As a vision corrective, Jesus asks Philip to look at the group as if his eyes were dilated, as if he were participating in what he saw. He asked Philip to see himself as having the same struggles, the same needs, emotionally, physically. He asked Philip not to see himself as an outsider, but as an insider.

When we are able to welcome others to our worship, without preconditions, we are able to “build capacity” into our worship for the future, a capacity that will linger into the next generation, a capacity for living with discomfort in certain situations for the sake of the possibility that lies in the future. Henri Nouwen writes in his 1996 book entitled The Inner Voice of Love:

“Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply. [Love] is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds. The more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart even when they depart from you. They will become part of yourself and thus gradually build a community within you. Those you have deeply loved become part of you. The longer you live, there will always be more people to be loved by you and to become part of your inner community. The wider your inner community becomes, the more easily you will recognize your own brothers and sisters in the strangers around you. Those who are alive within you will recognize those who are alive around you. The wider the community of your heart,

the wider the community around you. Thus the pain of rejection, absence, and death can become fruitful. Yes, as you love deeply the ground of your heart will be broken more and more, but you will rejoice in the abundance of the fruit it will bear.”

Hezekiah Walker has written a hymn that we sometimes sing at the Phillips Seminary in Tulsa. It goes like this: “I pray for you, you pray for me, I love you, I need you to survive. I need you, you need me. We’re all a part of God’s body, stand with me, agree with me. You are important to me. I need you to survive.”

In Matthew’s version of Jesus’ parable of the marriage feast (Matt. 22:1-18), the king, upon walking through the wedding [banquet] hall to welcome his guests, finds a man who is not wearing a wedding robe as would be fitting attire for the banquet and orders his attendants to oust him from the hall. One interpretation of this part of the parable is that the man was not properly dressed to express welcome to others. Being properly clothed for welcome practically meant having on the garment of love and joy for others provided by the king, extended to mean the hospitality provided by God’s selective love (Heb. *chesed*).

Mary Emily Briehl Duba recently defended her doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago by describing worship as a “place-making practice” for those in contemporary congregations who have been displaced from belonging and grieve a loss of identity from not having a permanent home. It is hard for us to imagine such a congregation, but today there are many congregations living in the shadows where this sense of displacement is a reality, where membership is transient and turns over regularly. When and where this is the case, it is hard to develop a sense of belonging or identity in the community. In such places, churches are called to provide a place of belonging and shape a Christian identity that travels with each person wherever they may go. Mary Duba speaks about the immigrants she interviewed in Bolivia during her mission to that country. These were largely native people uprooted from the mountains to the city. She reflects that “in the mountains, they knew each other well,” but “in the city, they hardly knew themselves.” It has been said the Jesus had no place to lay his head (Mt. 8:20), and Paul tells us that for much of his life, he was homeless (1 Cor. 4:11; 2 Cor. 11:27), “without sleep, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” If we at WOCC are to provide hospitality in today’s world, might it be in the transition from hardly knowing ourselves to knowing ourselves well, might it be in the form of providing a space for belonging to a displaced world?

Alleluia! Amen.