

“Radical Welcome”

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June 12th, 2016
4th Sun./Pentecost

I Kings 21:15-21^a

Luke 7:36-8:3

*One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him,
and he went into the Pharisee’s house, and took his place at table.*

Luke 7:36

Let us pray... O God,
May we be open to receive others by getting to know them first
before making judgments.
Help us to affirm simple ‘common courtesies’ as a way towards
transforming enemies into friends.

Amen

“Radical welcome” – Radical welcome is a phrase that became part of
the “God Is Still Speaking” initiative in 2004
that sought to “rebrand” the United Church of Christ.

Even how we say the name of our denomination, “UNITED CHURCH__ of Christ”
was part of an overall strategy to make the UCC more recognizable – as well as
to distinguish us from the more conservative Church of Christ.

No longer do we have to say,
“No, we’re the UNITED Church_of Christ.
We have musical instruments in *our* service.”

“God Is Still Speaking” was not only clever as a catchy marketing device,
but it became apparent that its message really meant something for people.
“Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma – God is still speaking”
has become an important response to extremists of all religious stripes.
God is not on a shelf somewhere to be glorified from afar,
or stuck in a box called tradition, or cut off from us so that
only an in-group controls access to God.

One of my favorite slogans that came out of the “God Is Still Speaking” program,
is an expression we use in our greeting every Sunday morning:
“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey,
you’re welcome here.”

This message speaks to some of the most basic things we are discovering
about the early Christian communities that became the Church:
‘Life journey’ and ‘radical welcome’.

The Prophet Elijah knew something about journeys.

He was on the lam for most of his career – primarily to escape
the wrath of King Ahab and his Baal priestess queen, Jezebel.
Jezebel was furious at Elijah because he had discredited her priests of Baal
and had them all killed – so she was out to kill him.

Willard, p.2

Meanwhile, King Ahab was interested in some real estate –
a neighbor's garden next to his castle.

As king you would think he could have enough of anything he wanted,
but he wanted more.

It is that childish impulse in us of wanting what someone else wants and has –
as if we would ever be satisfied by owning that same thing.

Since he can't get it legally, he gets it unethically with a veneer of legality
thanks to Jezebel.

The owner of the garden is put up on false charges of blasphemy
and is executed.

The land is fair game and the king is in a position to grab it.

God in the meantime is aware of this injustice and sends Elijah to confront
and condemn Ahab for his un-neighborly behavior...

For all the treachery and violent atrocities that are happening in the Middle East,
hospitality has been a very important social ethic
among traditional cultures there –
which is true in most traditional societies, everywhere.

There are certainly exceptions, but love your neighbor and welcome the stranger
are universally recognized ideals if not universally practiced.

Our Gospel scripture today is also a lesson in manners –

but as a bad example by how Jesus was also treated with discourtesy.

What makes this especially serious is that the host – named Simon,

was called Simon the Leper in other Gospel versions of this story.

Considering that he was hosting a dinner with others present,

this implies he was no longer a leper –and very likely he was healed by Jesus.

This makes him especially ungrateful, as Jesus points out that as Simon's guest,

he was not given any water to wash his feet, nor greeted with a kiss,

and so forth – which was common courtesy then.

What is a proper level of respect these days?

What must we do – at the least, to make someone feel welcome?

Our denomination's "God Is Still Speaking" program was not only about
advertising, but also about effective techniques for receiving visitors
and encouraging them to want to come back.

That ranged from nametags and gift bags to assistance with parking
and "follow-up" phone calls to first-time visitors.

I believe that the spirit of being "Open & Affirming" –

and not just an obligation to be politically correct,

is one of the most important contributions

the UCC has to offer the wider world.

To be "ONA" is to provide a standard of inclusivity that is desperately needed
to deal with most troubles in our society and beyond.

Willard, p.3

Common courtesy is needed at the heart of the “transgender bathroom” question –
how do we make gender-specific people feel welcome and safe,
just as straight people have come to expect this?

Common courtesy is needed in response to resurgent “racism” and “sexism”,
to counter discriminatory practices in business, real estate, and elections,
which also affect educational and career options.

Common courtesy is needed to challenge religious intolerance
which is not easily solved by dialogue,
but is helped by simply making room for one another.

Common courtesy is needed at the heart of the gun violence debate
that goes beyond guns as a symptom of the general hostility and
unwillingness to communicate about problems – let alone solve them.

Common courtesy is at the heart of what being “open & affirming” is about
which Jesus demonstrated frequently by radically welcoming
people who were otherwise ignored or despised.

The woman with the jar of perfume who rudely interrupted Simon’s dinner
to anoint and massage Jesus’ feet, did so to express her heartfelt thanks
to Jesus for a reason that is not explained.

Simon murmurs about this, questioning Jesus’ judgment for allowing this woman
to approach him in this way.

But Jesus uses a parable to urge Simon to do a little self-reflection himself
before jumping to conclusions.

The usual conclusions about this woman are that she was a prostitute –
or perhaps even Mary Magdalene who is introduced immediately
in verses that follow, named with a group of women who
were among the followers of Jesus.

Maybe this ‘woman of the city’ – who was called a ‘sinner’ was just a woman
who was known in that city for being a lot of trouble
because she spoke her mind or stood up for herself.

Maybe she was just an “uppity woman”.

Assertiveness could get a woman killed in some traditional societies –
even these days.

Though this woman with the perfume remains anonymous
and we are not told why she reaches out to Jesus,
it is clear that she risked strong criticism to do so.

Yet Jesus welcomed her, forgave her, and blessed her,
even though *he* risked strong criticism for doing so!

Willard, p.4

Old ways of thinking are hard to break and
customs can assume the authority of commandments.

Certainly not all customs should be defied.

Not all customs are outdated just because they are dated.

There can even be value in quaint or silly customs.

Though “we have always done it this way” invites a challenge,
yet some things are tried and true.

But it is those *hurtful* customs that exclude people – not for what they do,
but for who they are, that need changing.

“How would you feel if you were in that position?” that is the question

Jesus wants Simon and the rest of us to ask of ourselves –

so that we may do unto others as we would be treated.

It seems like such a small thing,

but so much of the troubles at work in the world could be relieved
by a little common courtesy like...

opening a door for someone, opening an opportunity for a student,

opening a dialogue to deal with a dispute between neighbors.

opening up yourself to hear some new music or try some new food.

opening up your ears to learn a new language,

opening up your heart to welcome people with different customs.

In the process, we affirm the diversity of the world God has created –

especially the diversity of people who speak with other vocabularies,

cook with different recipes, sing and listen to new music,

and affirm that there may be other perspectives to old problems,

new opportunities, and new ideas to bridge those chasms

of ignorance and fear that too often separate even people of goodwill.

Emily Harris and I have done many interfaith storytelling concerts together
and this is one she tells...

There once was a king who loved hunting and so he went forth with his nobles
into the countryside to hunt.

But they were caught in a terrible storm and

the king became separated from his companions.

He saw a light through the trees and approached it to find a cottage

and knocked on the door.

An older couple answered and they immediately recognized the king

and welcomed him in.

Now this man & woman were Jewish and they knew the king

was suspicious of their community,

and had even imposed harsh laws against the Jews.

Still they made the most of their efforts to make the king feel at home.

Willard, p.5

Helping him off with his wet cloak and boots, and having him sit by the fire,
they chatted a bit and entertained the king playing the fiddle and singing
until it was time for supper.

They all took their seats at the table and

the older woman lit the Sabbath candles and led the prayer.

Then they shared the pot of chicken stew – which the husband was quick to say
that though it was meagre fare, he loved his wife’s stew more
than any other dish she made.

The king agreed that this was the best chicken stew he had ever eaten
and asked for the recipe that he might have the royal chef
prepare it for him upon his return.

The older woman was pleased to hear this and graciously agreed
as they prepared a place for the king to sleep by the fire.

The next morning, the king was refreshed
and recognizing where he was, he set off for his castle,
bidding the couple his thanks and a warm farewell.

Back at the castle, he gave the recipe to the royal chef
and instructed him to prepare chicken stew for him and his court that evening.
With great ceremony he announced to those gathered that evening
that this was the best stew he had ever eaten.

After the first spoonful... he realized something was different!
Something was missing!

The king was embarrassed and he was furious!

He sent for the older couple and had them brought before him.

He demanded to know what ingredient they had left out!

The woman asked to see the recipe and she told the king,

“Nothing, sire. Nothing was left out.”

Then she thought a moment and said,

“Sire, when you came to us, you were lost, wet, and cold.

You sat down by our fire to get warm and
to be entertained with conversation and songs.

Then, we lit the candles and prayed the Sabbath prayer.

Perhaps the preparation for supper was the ingredient you missed?”

From that day on, the king treated the Jewish people in his kingdom
with great respect and affection for he had learned an important lesson
about “radical welcome”...

Amen

*Our lesson today from I Kings 21:15-21^a tells about
King Ahab's abuse of power as a corrupt king and a covetous neighbor –
but also how he is confronted by the Prophet Elijah
for the sake of justice...*

¹⁵ As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab,
“Get up and take ownership of the vineyard of Naboth,
which he had refused to sell to you. Naboth is no longer alive;
he's dead.”

¹⁶ When Ahab heard that Naboth had died, he got up and
went down to Naboth's vineyard to take ownership of it.

¹⁷ The LORD's word came to Elijah from Tishbe:

¹⁸ Get up and go down to meet Israel's King Ahab in Samaria.

He is in Naboth's vineyard. He has gone down to take ownership of it.

¹⁹ Say the following to him: This is what the LORD says:

So, you've murdered and are now taking ownership, are you? Then tell him:

This is what the LORD says:

In the same place where the dogs licked up Naboth's blood,
they will lick up your own blood.

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah,

“So you've found me, my old enemy!”

“I found you,” Elijah said,

“because you've enslaved yourself by doing evil in the LORD's eyes.

²¹ So I am now bringing evil on you! I will burn [you] until you are consumed...

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 7:36-8:3

7:36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him,
and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table.

37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner,
when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house,
brought an alabaster flask of ointment,

38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping,
she began to wet his feet with her tears,
and wiped them with the hair of her head,

and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself,

"If this man were a prophet,
he would have known who and what sort of woman this is
who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

40 And Jesus answering said to him,

"Simon, I have something to say to you."

And he answered,

"What is it, Teacher?"

[Jesus said,]

41 "A certain creditor had two debtors;
one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

42 When they could not pay, he forgave them both.
Now which of them will love him more?"

43 Simon answered,

"The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more."

And he said to him,

"You have judged rightly."

44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon,

"Do you see this woman?
I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet,
but she has wet my feet with her tears and
wiped them with her hair.

45 You gave me no kiss,
but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet.

46 You did not anoint my head with oil,
but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven,
for she loved much; but [the one] who is forgiven little, loves little."

48 And he said to her,

"Your sins are forgiven."

49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves,

"Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

50 And he said to the woman,

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

^{8:1}Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages,
preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

And the twelve were with him,

² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities:

Mary, called Mag'dalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,

³ and Jo-an'na, the wife of Chu'za, Herod's steward,

and Susanna, and many others, who

provided for them out of their means.