

The United Church of Christ at The Villages
June 29, 2014
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“Creating Space”

Our gospel reading today comes from Matthew Chapter 10, vs. 40-42
Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSV)

⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Friends, let us pray.

Gracious God, help us to recognize the strangers in our midst so that we may extend your extravagant hospitality and create a space for them to feel at ease, to be authentic, and know they are part of your Beloved Community. Amen.

We belong to a denomination that is publicly committed to extending an “extravagant welcome.” – not just a “regular” welcome but extravagant – excessive, “over the top” and extraordinary. In the United Church of Christ, "extravagant welcome" is not only a matter of opening the doors of our congregation on Sunday morning-- it is also a commitment to make the world a welcome place for everyone – including those outside our church, our ecumenical neighbors, those of other faiths and those who are most vulnerable.

Our gospel reading today, is the very last few verses of Jesus' farewell instructions to the disciples where Jesus addresses the topic of welcoming. Jesus has been preparing and teaching the disciples what to do and what to expect, and the difficulties that they will face on their journey. The disciples are heading to places where they will meet people who are different from them -- people who have different beliefs and different customs and who may speak a different language. Like nomads, they set out with no real home, no clothes, and no destination other than that where the Holy Spirit guides them to go. Jesus sent them out to be vulnerable, and totally dependent on the generosity of others. Will they be asked to share a meal and graced with an extravagant welcome? Or will they be turned away as strangers not to be trusted?

How does this gospel of welcoming speak to us today? Well, it's one challenge to create a culture of hospitality among acquaintances and friends where the strangers are the visitors to our church. It is quite another when we extend the concept of welcome to the immigrants in our midst.

Now, there are numerous arguments, for and against welcoming immigrants from both political and economic aspects. But, putting these considerations aside, let us ask the question -- from a faith perspective, and *purely* from a faith perspective, what we are called to do -- as Christians, and as members of a denomination that proclaims to be people of extravagant welcome?

First, when we speak of immigration rather than immigrants we take the human-ness out of the problem. And that is the heart of the issue – treatment of fellow human beings. We as Christians believe that God made all people in the image and likeness of God. We are talking about real human beings with real lives. As people of faith, as people of God, we have the ability to humanize the conversation and to proclaim the scripture upon which we base our beliefs.

Both the Hebrew and the New Testament scriptures bid us to welcome the stranger as a guest. Hebrew scriptures, recalling the oppression the Israelites suffered as foreigners, teach us to love strangers. The Book of Leviticus instructs the people, "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34).

The call to welcome the stranger was not only expressed in the scripture, but was also the measure of the community's faithfulness to God.

When a traveler came to town, they waited by the well, and it was incumbent upon the townspeople to house and feed the visitor for the night. Of course, these travelers were unknown to the community. They were aliens, often foreigners, people who ate different foods, wore different clothes, spoke different languages, and worshipped different gods. Opening one's home was risky, but this hospitality was central to the Hebrew identity. The *risk did not* define the people; their *hospitality did*, for they knew such hospitality was central to the character of their God.

Jesus, who was *always* willing to welcome those others would consider unwelcome, called on others to do the same. From the gospel of Luke.....“When you throw a dinner party, don’t invite your friends, your family or your rich neighbors, hoping that they will invite you back to their home. Instead, invite the poor, the lame, and the blind.”(Luke 14:13). The teachings of Jesus extend the tradition of welcome *well beyond* welcoming the foreigner, and extend it to welcoming the marginalized and vulnerable of our world, --- women, tax collectors, the poor, lepers, prostitutes, even our enemies. In Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, *no one* is labelled as a foreigner, a stranger, an immigrant or a refugee -- all are God's children and are all loved. Jesus calls us to treat strangers with the concern and love we would show him-- to help meet the basic needs of those who are new and needy among us: to notice their thirst, their loneliness, and to welcome their arrival as if Christ himself were at our door.

As a matter of faith, we need to do what we can to humanize the immigrants in our community, to understand them as our neighbors, to see them as strangers worthy of our hospitality, and to challenge ourselves to work so that their inherent worth and dignity is respected. The bottom line is, however, that for most people, the immigration system is confusing and difficult to navigate. And how did this happen? Have we lost sight of the fact that it was not so long ago that millions of European immigrants got off of boats without paperwork and became a part of American society. My grandfather was one of those people. He came here from Italy with very little education. He could not read or write Italian, never mind English. He came with a trade that he had picked up as

a boy. He married my grandmother, and they never worried about being deported, and they never worried about my mother, and her siblings being deported, or not having availability for education for their children so they could have a better life than they did. My grandparents always spoke of the United States as a wonderful country where they were making a better place for their children. Were things perfect? No- they faced discrimination too....but my grandfather was never labelled as undocumented or illegal, and he never worried about keeping his family together – just about working hard enough to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.

It is up to us, as people of faith, to create the environment and create the space that will allow for immigration reform – reform that will remove the labels of illegal, undocumented, stranger and foreigner- a reform that evokes *God's vision* that *all* are human and *all* are valuable.

In his book, “Reaching Out” Henri Nouwen speaks of moving from hostility to hospitality as a practice of our spiritual life. He says, “Hospitality means primarily a creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality wants to create...a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created....free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances.”

What I think Henri Nouwen is saying is that, from a faith perspective, the concept of welcome is foundational – it is the belief, the statement that whoever you are, you are

already like me in the way that it counts – you and I are not strangers - you are a beloved Child of God and that’s all you need to be for me to welcome you. And because we are alike in the way that counts, being beloved of God, then I will extend myself to know you, to help you, and to create space for you to be the authentic person God has called you to be.

This spiritual practice of real hospitality is a radical act that requires us to adopt a new way of being. It is about having the strength to do the right thing, the loving thing, and to overcome our fear to do the welcoming thing. Our faith and our commitment to extravagant welcome calls us to create the space where the Beloved Community is a reality where strangers are welcomed and affirmed in our common humanity.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” How will we, as members of the United Church of Christ, in the Villages, and in the wider community, help to create that welcoming space?

Amen.

Psalm 13 (NRSV)

¹ How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me