

## ***The Reward of Welcome***

Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ

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### **Hebrews 13:1-2**

*Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup>Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

### **Matthew 10:40-42**

<sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>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.”

What does a student, or a preacher, do when he or she feels stuck?

We Google.

I was feeling stuck this week, and so I Googled the word “welcome.” And there, between images of doormats, texts for how to write welcome messages and the Wikipedia link, was the link to YouTube: “Arlington – The Rap.” Even before watching the video again I laughed out loud because I remembered how the search committee had put the link to this very funny take on Arlington in the profile that they sent me to learn about the community. It was one of the many things I experienced from you that helped me feel welcome to Rock Spring and Arlington.

As I watched this video with its ribbing about high condo fees, a mall that has a lot of nothing in it, and how we can bend down to tie our shoes and get seven parking tickets, I laughed all the more. It seems even funnier now that I have been here for nearly a year and have experienced how true these things are! As funny as the video is, I think it points to a key of authentic welcome. Authentic welcome has an element of vulnerability to it. An acknowledgement that that we aren’t perfect, that we don’t have all the answers or all the resources, or everything that is needed in the relationship. With authentic welcome, there is space for the other to make a contribution.

This morning I want to explore this concept of welcome and why it is so central to ...well, everything. It is central to our faith, our experience of community, all of our relationships. Indeed, I don't think there is anything that is more important in a faith community. As Arthur Sutherland states, "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."<sup>1</sup>

The word "Welcome" has at its root "well" and "come." "Well" could mean something close to our current understanding of "wellness" or "well-being," but it could be stronger than that, implying desire or pleasure. "Come" finds its roots in an Old English word "comer," that is, one who arrives or, perhaps closer to the Greek, one who is received. Thus "welcome" can offer in its earliest sense an invitation to come and be well, or to be well in coming. Interestingly, the words "Host," "guest," "hostile," "hostage," "hospital," and "hospitality" all spring from the same Latin root *hostis*, meaning stranger or enemy. I find this terribly challenging.

If "welcome" is a practice of hospitality, then the act of welcome challenges me, and us, to be both host and guest at the same time.

We are so flip with the word "welcome," but the notion is deeply rooted in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. How one welcomed the stranger was part of the way the Hebrew community measured its faithfulness to God. When travelers arrived, they would wait by the well, and it was up to those who lived there to house and feed the visitor for the night. In Matthew's community, how one welcomed was a measure of faithfulness. The early Christian church also spoke about welcome. In Hebrews we are told that when offering hospitality to strangers we may be entertaining angels unaware.

How might we measure up in our ability to welcome the stranger?

I like to think of myself as a welcoming and hospitable person, but I will confess that it seems like I constantly have more to learn. I want to share one of my learning experiences with you. In Columbus we had two women, a mother and daughter (today I will call them Henrietta and Arnetta) who lived on the street and counted St. John's one of their spiritual and physical homes. Unlike almost every other street person I know, Henrietta and Arnetta chose to live on the street. Their distrust of "the system" and of others was so deep they could not receive the help many of

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<sup>1</sup> Sutherland, Arthur. *I Was A Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality*, Abingdon Press, 2006.

us offered to find them housing. A few years back we had an extremely cold winter with temperatures below zero for many consecutive nights.

I remember the night when members of our council expressed concern about Henrietta and Arnetta sleeping out on the street in the freezing weather. At the meeting the council unanimously approved the expenditure of a week in a Red Roof Inn for Henrietta and Arnetta and asked that I set this up for them.

The next day I went to the public library where I thought I might find them and told them the news. They were delighted but immediately had questions about transportation. Was this on the bus line? We hadn't thought of that. Fortunately, it was, and I added a monthly bus pass to this gift so that they could get back into downtown each day where they had access to meals and the computers at the library. They thanked me and told me how great it was to sleep so soundly and to have warm showers.

On their last day at the Red Roof Inn, Henrietta called me.

“I have a favor to ask. I am wondering if you could help me. Arnetta and I have a storage unit that has all of our possessions in it. Family pictures. Our bikes. Scrapbooks. We just got a notice that if we do not pay this up all of our stuff will go into auction or be thrown away.”

They had not paid for months, and so this was no small bill. I didn't have that kind of cash on hand, and the sum was high enough I would need to get a group of people to vote on it. She only had 24 hours.

“Henrietta, that is a lot of money.”

“I know. But it isn't as much as you paid for this week in the motel, is it? If I had the choice I would have picked the storage unit.”

“But it was so cold – the temperatures were so dangerously cold we were concerned for your safety.”

“Oh, well, when it gets so dangerously cold I have some friends who will take me in for a couple of nights. But this – the stuff in this storage unit – this is my life. All of the things I have that are important to me are in there. I wish you would have asked me.”

“I wish you would have asked me.” It was an important lesson for me in the art of welcoming. How quick we are to make assumptions about what people need or want.

Contrast my experience with Henrietta and Arnetta with a school in Southern LA that was having terrible difficulty with attendance and test scores. They started asking, “How can we help these kids succeed?” We have all been in conversations when we have speculated what people might need. Had the conversation taken place behind closed doors they may have thought of incentives to lure the kids to school. Instead, they asked them. When they asked, they learned that the kids were afraid to walk to school in the morning. So the school asked the parents and the neighbors if they would be willing to come outside in the morning so that the kids would feel safer. They did a publicity push and asked the neighborhood to do their outside chores – sweeping the walks, raking the yard, watering the garden, or simply sit on the porch with their coffee and paper – early in the morning when the kids were headed to school. The school has seen enormous progress. No one coming in from the outside with solutions to problems could have seen that.

With an interest in our exploration of becoming a Global Mission church, I have been reading a book called “*Going Global: A Congregation’s Introduction to Mission Beyond Our Borders.*” In it, the authors challenge the way most of us go about doing mission. In the introduction, they liken some mission trips to “Dancing with Elephants.” Often churches arrive with money and enthusiasm and a real desire to “make a difference,” but too often create havoc and destructive dependency. In talking about this danger, an African friend approached the author and shared this story:

“Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephant said, “Mouse, let’s have a party!” Animals gathered from far and near. They ate. They drank. They sang and danced. Nobody celebrated more and danced harder than Elephant. After the party was over, Elephant exclaimed, “Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!”

But Mouse did not answer.

“Mouse, where are you?” Elephant called. He looked around for his friend, and then shrank back in horror. There at Elephant’s feet lay Mouse. His little body was ground into the dirt, smashed by the big feet of his exuberant friend, Elephant.

“Sometimes, that is what it is like to do mission with you Americans,” the African storyteller commented. “It is like dancing with an elephant.”<sup>2</sup>

Can we begin to think about cultivating relationships and partnerships, rather than “giving to others” or “doing mission?” When we are intent on “doing for” we communicate that the other doesn’t have anything to offer us.

Terry Smith, one of the authors of *Going Global* writes about a partnership his church had with the Evangelical Church of Angola. During a trip when he was with Pastor Dambi, head of the Evangelical Church of Angola, Pastor Dambi tried to articulate the value of the partnership.

“As partners,” he shared, “the Western church is a voice for the voiceless, an advocate for us when we feel estranged, and a friend to whom we can turn. In our working together, you can teach us how to live faithfully with your wealth, but we can teach you how to live faithfully in our poverty. You want us to prove good use of your funds through our audited statements, but can you show us an audited statement of your compassion for the poor? We need each other because, as partners, we are something together which neither the Church in Angola nor the Church in North America can ever hope to be alone.”<sup>3</sup>

I have occasionally heard someone say, “Well, we are hospitable and everything, but I just don’t think they felt comfortable here.” Or .... “I don’t think this felt like a good fit for them.” This morning I want to challenge our readiness to assert that someone simply doesn’t fit. If to welcome means to create an environment where someone can be well, it occurs to me that we need to know the person to whom we are extending hospitality. And, if I take hospitality seriously, I recognize that it is a two-way street: it is not something that I offer, it something I am also simultaneously receiving. How might we greet another in a way that demonstrates we want to know who they are, what they are seeking, and what gifts and interests they have? How does the way we greet someone demonstrate that we really want to know them? Perhaps at coffee today instead of saying, “Hello! How are you? Isn’t the weather great?” We might ask, “What do you look for in a faith community? What are you passionate about? What are you interested in?” If we seek to be a people of welcome, we need to get to know the strangers in our

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Adeney quoted in *“Going Global: A Congregations Introduction to Mission Beyond Our Borders,”* Chalice Press: St Louis, 2011, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *“Going Global,”* p. 103.

midst.

The late Henri Nouwen was a priest who was a professor at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. He left his career at Harvard to enter the L'Arche Community in Toronto. L'Arche is a community where about 100 people live – 50 people with disabilities and 50 others who assist them. The road Nouwen took to L'Arche is another story; I want to share with you a piece of his experience.

He arrived and was asked to help Adam. Adam could not dress himself, his body was deformed, and he had seizures. Nouwen described being very afraid, but with each passing week his fear diminished a little more. And this is how he described what he received from Adam.

“Maybe I can say it very simply. Adam taught me a lot about God's love in a very concrete way. First of all, he taught me that being is more important than doing, that God wants me to be with God and not to do all sorts of things to prove that I'm valuable. My whole life had been doing, doing, doing, so people would finally recognize that I was okay. I'm such a driven person who wants to do thousands and thousands of things so that I can somehow finally show that I'm a worthwhile being. People say, "Henri, you're okay." Here I was with Adam and Adam said, "I don't care what you do as long as you will be with me." It wasn't easy just to be with Adam. It isn't easy to simply be with a person without accomplishing much.

Then he taught me something else. He taught me that the heart is more important than the mind. Well, if you've come from a university, that's hard to learn. Minds thinking, having arguments, discussing, writing, doing, that is what a human being is. Didn't Thomas Aquinas say that human beings are thinking animals? Well, Adam didn't think. Adam had a heart, a real human heart. I suddenly realized that what makes a human being human is the heart with which he can give and receive love.”<sup>4</sup>

Here's the thing. All of this talk about welcome and hospitality in the Bible? I think we are too quick to read these passages and think it is about a call for us to do something for someone else. Yes, Jesus cared about the poor. Yes, we are to help others. But this is a deeper and more challenging call. This is a call for us to be in relationship – to give and receive – to greet each

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen\\_3301.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3301.htm)

person we meet and recognize that there, within each person, are gifts to be shared and needs to be met. And to understand that everyone we meet has a need to give. Just like us. Therein is our reward.

Amen.