

The Reward of Welcome

Let us pray: God of love, God of welcome, help us to welcome your still-speaking voice into our midst – in our hearts, into our minds, into our bodies this morning. Help us to be open to being changing. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our gathered hearts be acceptable to you, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

So, welcome.

It's kind of a buzzword in a lot of churches these days – perhaps most especially the United Church of Christ.

“No matter who you are, or where you are on your life's journey – you are welcome here.”

This is a place of extravagant welcome!

Open & Affirming...

Immigrant Welcoming...

We make a big deal out of how much we welcome people, ALL people, in our UCC churches. In this UCC church.

But beyond saying it... which is important to be sure... how welcoming are we truly?

How willing are we to be receive the reward of offering welcome?

How willing are we to be changed by offering welcome?

Because when Jesus concludes his speech to the disciples with these words, he's not talking about an easy, comfortable, bring out the best china kind of welcome. He's talking about a revolutionary welcome.

A welcome that changes things.

That turns things upside down.

That opens our eyes and brings about real heart change.

How open are we to that kind of welcome?

I want you to spend a little time this morning in reflection.

You could share with the person you're sharing space with, you could write some of this down, or you could simply be in quiet reflection.

When was the last time you came into a place where you needed to be welcomed? Now to be clear, this isn't a place full of friends and family you already know – this is a place where you don't know anyone. Where you feel uncomfortable and a little off balance.

What did that feel like? Needing to be welcomed? In your body, in your heart, in your mind – how did that feel?

Give folks a few minutes...

Are any of you willing to share how that feels? (Use the chat box or unmute yourself)

The church and we as individuals who hold live in a comfortable, privileged position in our communities, rarely, if ever, **need** to be welcomed.

Sure, it's nice when someone has a cold drink for us, gives us a big hug, greets us by name, but our lives don't depend on it.

Because mostly we are welcomed – everywhere we go – or we're the ones doing the welcoming.

But for these disciples, these 12 disciples, the journeys they are about to embark upon, will require them **needing** to be welcomed.

Remember, just two weeks ago, we heard Jesus telling them, "Take no money, no gold or silver or copper in your belts, take no bags, or extra tunics or sandals or staffs – you will depend on the welcome you find in the towns you visit.

Literally, for your survival, for your daily bread, you will need to be welcomed into people's homes.

It is a vulnerable place to be when you need to be welcomed.

Think about your childhood recess. All of us desperately wanting to be welcomed into a game, to be welcomed into a group of friends. The heartbreak of not receiving that welcome.

It is a vulnerable place.

And it is a place I think all of us should experience regularly.

Go out into the world, into towns and villages and homes and bring nothing with you. Just you – your life, your story, your experiences. Depend on the welcome of strangers – open your heart to the possibility of rejection and the extravagant gift welcome is when it is warmly and freely given.

Church – we should never be ONLY the people who are doing the welcoming, we also must experience the vulnerability, the difficulty of being welcomed.

Because otherwise, we're never going to understand how to truly welcome others – how to offer a cup of cold water without demanding something in return. Without demanding assimilation, gratitude, a dimming of another's light in return.

“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.”

What in the world does that all mean?

When we welcome someone – we better be ready to welcome ALL that they are. All the truth they have to share with us, all the richness of their story, of their experiences.

Even when, especially when, someone's identity, someone truth, threatens our own equilibrium. Our own worldview.

It starts with knowing their names – their chosen names, their God-given identities.

With respecting the story they choose to share with us.

And in the case of prophets, in the case of righteous people, their words for us will inevitably be a word of challenge.

Comfort too, sure, at some point – but challenge, most definitely.

Let's take a little more time for reflection.

When have you welcomed someone into your life and been changed by them?

[Give a few minutes]

The text from the Hebrew Scriptures for this week is a good one – I recommend going and reading up on it after church: Jeremiah 28, specially verses 5-9.

This chapter is one of the only exchanges we hear between two prophets – Jeremiah and Hananiah. On the eve of the Babylonian capture and destruction of Jerusalem – two prophets come forth.

One – Hananiah preaches resistance, offers a word of hope, a promise of eventual victory of Judah over Babylon.

Jeremiah preaches that the Babylonians and the exile with it are coming. The Israelites need to accept that and be ready to make homes in a land that isn't theirs. Be ready to try to build community in a place where they are strangers. And be willing to wait on God, because God isn't acting to change their situation any time soon.

Sometimes the word, sometimes the reward of the prophet, looks nothing like a reward.

Sometimes it looks like family falling apart, like divisions splitting mother from daughter, like anger and a deep, penetrating resistance to the word a prophet brings.

Sometimes, oftentimes, our reaction to the prophets in our midst, are to simply tune them out.

Call them crazy, or too riled up, or impatient, or going about it the wrong way.

But here's the thing about this message from Jesus:

It doesn't say those who welcome you and then try to change you.

Those who welcome you but ignore the story you bring.

Those who welcome you, but want you to be just like them.

Those aren't the kinds of welcome Jesus is talking about – this welcome Jesus calls us too – is the kind of welcome that makes us all vulnerable.

That opens every single of us to being changed by our encounter with another.

Welcoming a prophet demands much more of us than simply saying hello and expecting those we welcome to keep us comfortable.

Welcome is a willingness and a call to share the welcome we have experienced first from God with others.

It starts with welcoming ourselves as worthy, beautiful, powerful and unique. Not over or against anyone else, but simply because we're us! I'm me. You're you.

From welcoming ourselves, we can extend the welcome out. To where God is calling us.

It's a call to recognize Black beauty and strength and power in our midst.

It's a call to remember the Stonewall Riots and welcome the generations of Trans, gender-fluid, queer children that follow in the footsteps of Black trans-women – finally able to see themselves in the witness of adults who fought to be exactly who they are.

It's a call to fight for the liberation of ALL people, whether or not their story makes us comfortable.

Because God loves them. Just as they are. And God loves you.

Sharing love is a very important part of sharing welcome.

And a cup of cold water is a very good place to start.

Amen.