

“A SECOND CUP OF TEA”
Psalm 89:1-4, , 15-18; Matthew 10:40-42
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When I was on sabbatical three years ago, I would attend a different church every Sunday morning. I considered it research. I would get up, get dressed, open the Boston metro yellow pages to “Churches–United Church of Christ,” plunk my finger down randomly, and off I would go—to Newton, Cambridge, Winchester, Lexington, Wellesley, Copley Square, Jamaica Plain, and on it went. I went to big churches and small churches, obviously affluent churches, and those who were struggling to keep the doors open and pay the heating bill.

Once I found the church and made my way to the sanctuary, church members who welcomed me and pegged me as a visitor made me feel more comfortable. The church got extra points if they handed me some kind of visitors’ information. It was something to read while I waited for worship to begin, and it was a way to find out something of the character of this church: was it Open and Affirming, how were they involved in the larger community, did they seem, well, hospitable to outsiders? I was always afraid when I sat down that I was sitting in some regular’s assigned seat, but only once did someone actually stop short at the end of the pew and glare at me. After worship, came coffee hour. As part of my research, I always attempted coffee hour. Sometimes the friendly people who greeted me offered to take me to coffee hour. I liked that, especially if they hung around to talk or introduced me to other people. In the absence of a guide, I would follow the crowd to wherever, grab a beverage, and wait. And wait. And wait. Three minutes if you are standing alone in a fellowship hour, knowing no one, seems an eternity. There’s everyone else, talking and laughing, and there’s you, just standing, feeling like an idiot. Three minutes. That’s how long I gave them. Three minutes, and then I was out of there, never to return. Alternatively, if people greeted me, made me welcome and were willing to talk to me, I would often stay for a second cup of tea.

I told you last week that this morning, I would be talking about what the Christian posture of hospitality means in terms of the church community, and obviously, the first level of hospitality involves the welcome we project to newcomers and outsiders. Says Jesus in this morning’s gospel reading from Matthew, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” This is not an insignificant statement. In fact, if one looks at the entire sweep of Jesus’ ministry, it is one long testimony of welcome. Jesus is the one who teaches people, eats with people, touches people indiscriminately: he does simply not discriminate between rich and poor, between devout and marginalized, between men and women, between tax collectors and rulers of the synagogue, but gathers all who would come to him, and makes nonsense out of the usual social and religious divisions of his time. And he counsels his disciples to observe an equally broad hospitality.

So what does it mean for us to be a hospitable church? We begin with the welcome of the threshold, how we invite those who enter our doors for the first or second or third time to be part of us, if only for a day. We learn their names; we show them around; we ask about them and their families. We invite them to fellowship hour and answer whatever questions they might have. We project what should be the underlying truth of our community: that we genuinely

believe that in welcoming strangers, we are welcoming the divine into our community. For that foundational, deeply theological reason, and not for reasons of marketing or strategies of church growth, but because we offer hospitality to all that is God's, we are interested in all who find their way here and we wish to make them comfortable in our midst, our very honored guests.

But the hospitality of the threshold is only the first level of welcome within the church. Then comes the hospitality of the structure. At some point, our guests may want to join our family, and how easy do we make that for them? There's the welcome of the physical structure. We continue to learn new ways to make our building more hospitable to those of differing physical abilities. Large-print bulletins, the effectiveness of our hearing assistance, identifying and removing barriers to all people being able to freely navigate our building: all these are important.

But when one thinks of the church structurally, we also need to think about leadership structure. I was recently talking with a former colleague who now serves a church that had remained a pretty stable community of about 125 souls until she came as minister. Then new people started joining the church, and while the old members were at first thrilled to have new folks in their midst, soon these new members wanted to participate in the church's life in significant ways. Now let me tell you, just as all the families of that church had their assigned seats in worship, they had their assigned tasks in managing the church. They did those jobs, faithfully, consistently, and well. However, new members brought with them new suggestions for ways of managing the church's life and ministries. And you know what they were told? That's not how we do it here. We do it this way. Those are the least hospitable words in the church's vocabulary. And you may laugh, and think smugly, "that would never happen here"; but unfortunately that's not true. One example: two years ago, it was suggested that we do something as simple as change the menu for the Maundy Thursday meal. I'm ashamed to say I was the first person to balk at the idea. I like the way we do it now, I whined. And so did others. End of creative suggestion.

Where is the line, where should the line be drawn between church tradition and openness to new ideas? It's tougher than it looks. I think of all the wonderful manuals we have developed for Hanging of the Greens, Salmon Barbeque, Easter Breakfast, other fellowship events, or how we mark in worship particular church holidays. If you haven't seen these manuals, you should. On one level they are truly wonderful. When we give new leaders the blueprints for how it has been done in the past, we allow them to do what has been done before efficiently, effectively. It's a level of empowerment: the holy secrets are revealed. But what if one of those leaders wants to do something really new, something different? How hospitable are we to those ideas, to that level of new leadership? It's a question. And I'm not suggesting here that we should do away with all tradition, reinvent everything every year. Just that I, and maybe you as well, might need to be reminded that when we give someone a job to do, and they propose a different way of doing it, we need to push past a knee-jerk "this is the way we do it" to a more careful level of consideration.

And if that's not a big enough responsibility, I have one more. One final challenge of hospitality in the church: the hospitality of the spirit or the hospitality of becoming. In the United Church of Christ in general, and in this church, I think we do a pretty good job of convincing people that they are welcome here with both their faith and their doubts. "No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" proclaims the text of a UCC ad. And we celebrate the grace of

both God's and the church's acceptance. But then what? The great pastoral theologian Henri Nouwen, in an essay on hospitality, declares that a hospitable space is not one where we are invited to come as we are and then stay the same, but instead, true hospitality offers both the invitation and the means for spiritual change, spiritual transformation. Or as a lay person in a previous church reminded me once, God loves us enough both to accept us as we are and to never leave us as God found us. I think the greatest challenge of the church is this third level of welcome, creating a culture, if you will, of critical assessment and active engagement with who we are as people. Come, with all the ways the world has wounded you and all the ways you are confused or estranged, we say to people. But if we don't try to heal the wounds, if we don't invite and challenge and empower people to greater spiritual reflection and maturity, have we done them any favors? What are the tools that would be helpful to you in deepening your spiritual life? How can the church create a safe environment for you to engage your own particular broken places? What do you need from worship, from adult education, from this supportive community? How can we better make this church a place where we move forward in our spiritual journeys?

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." If there is any group of people I have known who want to live out the gift of hospitality in the church, it is all of you. So let us continue to be about that work, making real in this place the truth of God's extravagant, transforming welcome. Thanks be to God. Amen.