

“The welcome that never wears out”

June 29, 2008

Text: Psalm 13, Matthew 10:40-42

I.

The *God Is Still Speaking* initiative, which our denomination launched a few years back, has played a significant role in energizing and giving new vision to our *United Church of Christ* churches around the country. As part of this initiative, we talk all the time about God’s *extravagant welcome*.

Every Sunday morning during our welcoming time, we say—as I did this morning:

**No matter who you are or where you are along
your life’s journey, you are welcome here.**

Think about it! If we truly mean it, that’s a bold statement. No matter anything about you or me—any of us—we’re welcome in God’s church.

- No matter the life we had yesterday or last year or when we we’re growing up ...
- no matter the bad decisions we made last week or last month ...
- no matter if we’ve been on the wrong side of *good luck* and if we’ve failed at this and failed at that ...
- no matter if we haven’t been able to make our key relationships in life work and the guilt is eating us up ...
- no matter anything about us—physically, with our health; psychologically, biologically, ethnically ... whatever it is ...
- no matter anything, we’re human beings ... created in the divine image of our Creator God; and God has a claim on our lives; and, therefore, **God’s welcome never wears out ...**

II.

We hear all the time in our popular culture about people *wearing out their welcome*. Usually, we’re referring to guests who, perhaps, stay more than three days ... or people who have come into our community—at work, in the neighborhood, in some association or group—who just grate on people after a while.

We've all known people who have, for whatever reason, *worn out their welcome*. With us human being, it happens all the time. However, with God, it doesn't happen.

- God may get frustrated with us ...
- God may be deeply saddened by some of the things we do ...
- God may be hugely disappointed in some of the decisions we've made, but God's welcome of us *never wears out*.

As the Bible affirms, again and again, our God is a welcoming God. It's God's nature to be welcoming; it's built into the essence of God's being. It's like God can't do otherwise.

Our reading from **Matthew 10**, which I just shared with you, bears this out. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has been talking to the disciples about the challenges of mission outreach.

He's training them, orienting them—getting ready to send them out to evangelize and spread the *good news* of God's love. And he's telling them that ...

- *it's not going to be easy ... and that ...*
- *there will be rejection and tough times ... and that ...*
- *their deepest commitments will be challenged.*

And then, in our reading this morning, Jesus says: *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

The message is clear: when we welcome another human being, we welcome Jesus and we welcome God. When we open our hearts and spirits to another person—whatever their life-situation—Christ is there ... and God is there.

III.

All of which means for us, as Christians, we're supposed to be welcoming to all of God's people because God welcomes us. Just as God welcomes us, accepts us, and forgives us, we're supposed to do the same for others.

This is the meaning of God's *extravagant welcome*. And what lies underneath this is God's infinite *compassion* for God's creation. If there were one word to define God's heart or spirit, it would be *compassion* ... which, of course, is an expression of *love*.

We see this same *compassion* in Jesus. And as Jesus' followers, we, too, are supposed to have *compassion* for others. Compassion is *feeling* for others. *Feeling* their hurt and pain, their grief and sadness. *Feeling* their disappointment, depression, their troubled spirit, whatever it is.

God's **welcome never wears out** because God's *compassion* is to the ends of the earth.

Indeed, the history of God's relationship with God's people is that God cannot *let them go*. God cannot bring God's self to reject them.

There's this powerful scripture in **Hosea 11** where God is on the edge of destroying Israel, of unleashing God's intense anger and wrath. Israel has been sinning, flagrantly—greed, idolatry, exploitation of the poor—and God has had it.

But listen to God's internal struggle with all of this ... as God thinks this through:

*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.*

*I will NOT execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Israel;
for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.*

With the God of the Bible, friends—always—compassion wins the day. Compassion *is* what God is; it *is* what God does. And we, as recipients and beneficiaries of God's compassion, are supposed to offer this same compassion to others—to every human being.

- To the vulnerable ones—the ones struggling on the outside trying to get in ... the refugees ... displaced persons ... victims of war and violence and all kinds of natural disasters ...
- to the weak ones—the ones who keep falling every day ... who can't seem to get it together ...
- to the frail ones—the ones not gifted at birth with great strength and fortitude ... every day, fighting an uphill battle, through no fault of their own ...

IV.

It's not a question of whether we deserve it or not.

1. Does the **prodigal son** (Luke 15) deserve to be welcomed home by his father, no questions asked, and then to be celebrated? After all, he's been out wasting his entire inheritance.
2. Do the **workers in the vineyard** (Matthew 20) who show up late in the afternoon, right before quitting time ... do they deserve the same reward as the workers who started working at six o'clock in the morning?
3. Do any of us who continually mess up ... who, for whatever reason, continue to make bad choice after bad choice ... does there come a point where we don't deserve another chance?

Friends, the **God Is Still Speaking God**—the God of infinite love and mercy, the God of amazing grace, the God who saved—even—a wretch like me, as the popular hymn goes ... this God gives us another chance. Why? Because that's what God does. Can't help God's self. It's built into God's nature.

The God of the Bible, friends ... the God of Jesus of Nazareth ... your God and my God, indisputably, is a God of new beginnings. And the welcome that this God extends to all of us, therefore, is a **welcome that never wears out**.

V.

Part of the challenge and mission of the church is that there are people who have never met this God. There are countless thousands—even millions—of people who have never experienced the power of *saving grace*.

Many of them are locked into feelings of low self-esteem. They don't feel worthy ... or deserving. For whatever series of reasons, they can't seem to get control of the different forces in their lives. Every day, it's something or somebody. Or maybe, it's just bad luck—random bad luck.

But, you see, God knows we have these feelings. God knows we struggle ... that we get stressed out and beaten down. God just needs us to meet God halfway. God needs some gesture on our part. God knows.

Listen to the Psalmist in **Psalm 13**:

How long, O Lord, how long? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul?

And have sorrow in my heart all day long?

Consider me and answer me, O Lord my God, give light to my eyes.

And of course, God does. And when we meet God halfway, we discover this; and we know it—through God's extravagant welcome, the **welcome that never wears out**.

VI.

I want to close with a beautiful story. It's a variant of a story we've told before around the **God Is Still Speaking** theme.

There was an ex-con going home. Finally, his moment had come. He was on a bus, now, with a bunch of noisy college kids ... staring, glassy eyed, out the window. After a rest

stop, however, when they got back onto the bus, a young woman sat down beside him and struck up a conversation.

And soon he was sharing with her how he'd been in prison for four years and how his wife hadn't written him at all over the past three years. When he learned that he was being paroled, he wrote her again telling her that he still loved her and that he hoped she wanted him back ... but that he would understand if she never wanted to see him again.

To make it easier on both of them, he suggested that his wife use a yellow handkerchief to communicate her feelings. If she wanted him back, she would tie the handkerchief on the old oak tree near their home. If there was no handkerchief, he would stay on the bus and keep going.

When word of this arrangement spread throughout the bus, the drama was building as the bus entered the man's hometown. Approaching his home, the college kids flocked to the windows. When the old oak tree came into sight, almost instantly, cheering broke out.

On the tree were not one, but dozens of yellow handkerchiefs.

Wow! Talk about an extravagant welcome!

That's the welcome God extends to every human being. And when we, as believers in God and as followers of Christ—when we live out that welcome, in the daily unfolding of our lives, it makes a difference.

Suddenly, everything around us changes ... Why? Because compassion and love are everywhere ... and people can feel it ... and they're drawn in ... and we feel closer to God ... and we feel better about ourselves ...

And life is *abundantly* worth living.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com

