

“Welcoming”

[The video, *“Church Welcome”* was shown.]

Taking that video together with our Gospel Lectionary Reading, the subject of “Welcoming” is brought to the forefront! The Scripture is part of Matthew’s report about how Jesus prepared the Original Disciples for a missionary journey. The Lord gave them instructions, warned them about persecutions, gave them promises and a pep talk to encourage them to not be afraid, called them to confess their faith in him, explained he and their message would result in creating divisions with family and friends, and, finally, he taught them about the rewards of welcoming. In today’s Scripture, Jesus spoke about the relationship between the reception they received on their missionary trip and the welcome of himself. He went on to elaborate anyone welcoming the disciples, God’s messengers, a good person, and even the least of Jesus’ followers because he or she is his follower will be rewarded. All of that was certainly encouraging to the Original Disciples as they were about to head out on their own missionary adventures.

On this Freedom Sunday, it is appropriate for us to consider the overall subject of “Hospitality” or “Welcoming” because it is through God’s and Jesus’ Welcoming that we receive our True Freedom. Although our Scripture was about how the disciples would be welcomed, implicitly, Jesus’ words carried with them his own example of showing the Divine Parent’s Radical and Extravagant Hospitality – Invitation and Welcome into a New Faith Relationship with God based on the Almighty’s Agape – Self-giving and Sacrificial Love or Grace for all people. Jesus frequently challenged the prevailing religious sentiment of rejecting and judging some people as unacceptable to our Maker by welcoming and loving the outcasts, the rejected, the judged, the sick, the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the powerless! As I have pointed out on previous occasions, it is unfortunate that many self-professing Christians and their religious communities follow more closely the judgmental approach over people, which was demonstrated by Jesus’ adversaries, than they do the Radical and Extravagant Welcome shown by him.

The video, which followed the Scripture Reading, is much more in line with the example of Radical and Extravagant Hospitality or Welcome, which Jesus repeatedly demonstrated. So, let’s take a few moments to recall the message shown in the video. I assume the video was intended to be directed toward guests but, also, it models for members of the congregation how we are called to welcome our guests. The video started, **“WE’RE GLAD YOU’RE HERE TODAY – WE WANT YOU TO FEEL WELCOME”**. In support of our “God Is Still Speaking” Emphasis on manifesting Radical and Extravagant Welcome toward all people, the video next listed things a welcoming congregation does, **“THIS CHURCH IS A PLACE YOU CAN CALL HOME – WHERE YOU CAN GRAB A CUP OF COFFEE AND MEET NEW FRIENDS”**. At a recent New Participants’ Gathering for New Members and our New Guests, it was clear – our New Participants join frequently in our Worship and Fellowship because of our friendliness and welcome! Many were also attracted to us by our New Digital Sign and its messages about our “God Is Still Speaking” Welcome and Hospitality.

The video went on to explain, **“TODAY WE ARE GOING TO SING TOGETHER – NOT BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE ENTERTAINED BUT BECAUSE WE WANT TO GIVE GLORY TO GOD”**! We are obviously not a big or mega church, which attracts potential

customers by entertaining them, although our Music Ministry is frequently inspiring and, at times, entertaining. Our Worship Celebration includes the gathered Worshippers joining in singing hymns and songs, which glorify God and support the message addressed by the Scripture and the Sermon.

The video continued, **“TODAY WE ARE GOING TO LEARN TOGETHER BECAUSE WE BELIEVE GOD STILL SPEAKS THROUGH THE BIBLE – NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE ON YOUR JOURNEY – NO MATTER WHAT’S IN YOUR PAST – AT THIS CHURCH YOU ARE ACCEPTED – YOU ARE CARED ABOUT AND YOU ARE LOVED”**. Now, the creator of the video attempted to limit the Still Speaking God to communicating through the Bible. However, since we have received the Gift of God’s Holy Spirit, our Divine Parent is not limited to speaking only through what has been written in the Scriptures. Indeed, the Almighty can provide us new insights in a variety of ways – especially through Jesus’ example! The video clearly aligned itself with our “God Is Still Speaking” emphasis in the United Church of Christ for it even included a portion of a quote from the UCC theme “No Matter Where You Are On Life’s Journey – You Are Welcome Here!” We certainly agree with the video’s concluding statements, **“THANKS FOR SHARING YOUR DAY WITH US – WELCOME HOME”!**

Now, some may point out that in our Scripture, Jesus was talking about the welcome his Original Disciples would receive during their missionary journey. However, as I mentioned earlier, the focus on welcoming in our Reading assumes the disciples observed Jesus providing Radical and Extravagant Welcome to folks, who usually experienced rejection and oppression, in their society. Since the disciples and we are to follow Jesus’ example, Barbara Brown Taylor pointed out “we are not ‘consumers’ but ‘providers of God’s love’. We’re not supposed to seek a place of safety and reassurance in the church – it’s not ‘a hideout,’ she says, not ‘the place where those of us who know the secret password can gather to celebrate our good fortune,’ and we are not simply ‘chosen people who have been given more good gifts than we can open at one sitting: healing, forgiveness, restoration, resurrection.’ Instead, ‘the Holy Spirit comes knocking at the door, disturbing our members – only meeting and reminding us that it is time to share’”. Taylor wrote, “What must it be like not only to talk dependence on God but to live it everyday for a year, understanding that reliance on God equals reliance on the hospitality of others? That kind of knowledge could change a person for good”. (From a sermon in Bread of Angels by Barbra Brown Taylor as reported by Kathryn Matthews in her meditation, “Even a Cup of Cold Water” on Weekly Seeds)

As we have been freed by our Divine Parent’s Radical and Extravagant Hospitality and Welcome through Jesus Christ to live out the New Faith Relationship with God and the New Life in Christ, so we are called to be bearers of that freedom and message to others! We do that with our individual actions of Inviting and Welcoming All People to share in our Worship Celebrations and in our Fellowship experiences. We do it when we invite and welcome a diverse mix of persons. Finally, we encourage others to join in our Freedom in Christ – in our New Faith Relationship with God through our manifesting God’s Agape Love and Radical and Extravagant Hospitality and Welcome in our life together, our supporting justice, and our service to others! Let God’s Love, Freedom, and Welcome Ring! Amen.