

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

January 18, 2009
3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Romans 15:1-7 & Matthew 25:31-46

God's Radical Welcome

"You are very welcome here."

These are the words that were extended to us wherever we went in our travels throughout Northern Ireland last fall. "You are very welcome here." Whether we were at a Presbyterian church or at one of the many meetings we attended, the first words shared by the host were, "You are very welcome here."

Welcome is a theme that I have been pondering lately. And it's that theme that I want to explore with you this morning as we think about the role of welcome in our lives as Christians and in our life as a church.

As many of you know, Jody and I, along with our daughter Martha, have just returned from a 4-month sabbatical that had us in Northern Ireland for the bulk of that time. I want to add my thanks to First Presbyterian Church to those expressed by Jody last Sunday. We are very grateful for this gift of time in which we were able to step away from this place for a wee bit and step into another as a way of being renewed, refreshed and rejuvenated.

From the middle of September until the middle of December we lived and worked as volunteers at the Corrymeela Community. This place in which we settled for the fall is a tract of land on the edge of a cliff on Northern Ireland's North Antrim Coast overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. On this beautiful and peaceful site are a half dozen buildings that are used extend a warm welcome to the over 6000 people a year that come to Corrymeela. These visitors to Corrymeela come for a variety of purposes. Some are there seeking a bit of respite from their busy lives. Some are there to study and learn about a variety of religious and cultural topics. Some are there to intentionally interact with others who are not like them, with the desire to understand one another and to overcome longstanding divisions. Some are there to simply have fun in a safe place with new acquaintances who fast become friends.

What is common among all who come to Corrymeela is the welcome they receive as soon as they arrive. For Corrymeela is place of welcome and hospitality that makes no distinction in how that welcome is extended. Everyone is welcome. In fact, everyone is very welcome at Corrymeela.

The overarching theme and focus of our sabbatical is contained in one word: *reconciliation*. Bringing down the barriers that divide us and establishing relationships of mutual respect are at the heart of reconciliation. Among the reasons that we spent the bulk of our sabbatical at Corrymeela is because of its more than 40-year history of fostering reconciliation. What Corrymeela has learned and what Corrymeela taught us is that the quest for reconciliation begins with the full and complete welcome that is offered from the first moments of acquaintance.

And that welcome is the first act of hospitality, which is the culture and environment in which reconciliation can grow.

For those of you who were around the church this past fall know that while we were overseas, the leadership of First Presbyterian Church was guiding the congregation through a process of discernment to discover where God is calling this church in its next chapter. After a series of gatherings, a survey and a town hall meeting, what emerged as the top priority for our church is none other than hospitality. But even before this result emerged, there was a working group of church folks who, along with Linda Loving, our sabbatical supply pastor, began exploring this topic of hospitality as an important expression of sharing God's love.

Imagine how pleased Jody and I have been to discover that what we had been soaking up dovetails beautifully with what the congregation has also been exploring. The Holy Spirit works in special and wondrous ways.

Welcome is a theme found in the scriptures—often in relationship to how the people of God are to live with each other. As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome he is arguing that because Jesus has come among us as the promised Messiah from God, the welcome that Jesus extends to us is the same welcome that we are to extend to one another. Paul is particularly concerned that Jews and Gentiles alike are called to glorify God. This is yet another place where it is clear that the invitation to follow Jesus is extended to all people. Even though Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise made to the Jews, the gift of Jesus is for all people, no matter their background or history. Paul writes, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:7)

So the first thing we can learn about welcome as it applies to us today is that we are to welcome one another within our community itself. It is a witness in and of itself for a visitor or outsider who comes into our midst to observe that we extend a warm and genuine welcome to one another.

Does it show in the way we act that we are a community bound together in Christ? Do we exhibit the warmth of the love that comes to us in Jesus? Do we act toward one another in such a way that observers' curiosity might be aroused to the point that they might ask, “How do you all get along so well?”

It's clear that the welcome we extend as part of hospitality is the welcome that we practice everyday with one another. Welcome is extended to both those we know as well as to those we don't yet know.

A good case in point of this is the very warm and enthusiastic welcome that you have extended to Jody, Martha and me upon our return to Bozeman. Certainly we are not strangers here having been together these last dozen years. Nevertheless, it is a most appropriate way to renew our bonds of friendship and relationship as we have now been reunited. Could we begin to think of our gathering together each time as a joyful reunion? For in that reunion we say to each other, “Welcome back!”

The second thing we can learn about welcome today is from Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats that we read from Matthew's gospel today. This story is often used as a basis for the social ministries of compassion in the church—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner and caring for the sick. Indeed a compelling call to mission and ministry is contained in this story of Jesus. But there is more to this story that relates to our theme of hospitality and welcome.

This story points to the very core of what it is that we're doing when we extend ourselves toward others. In this story Jesus divides the righteous, the sheep, from the unrighteous, the goats. In both cases, the righteous and the unrighteous are portrayed as not understanding the rationale for the destiny to which they are pointed. And in each case they are told that when they did (or did not) help the needy, the poor, the sick and the friendless, they were doing (or not doing) these things to Jesus himself.

Did you hear the part about welcome here? "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Whenever you saw a stranger and welcomed that one, you welcomed me." Jesus is declaring that it is an act of worship to welcome the stranger. For in welcoming the stranger, we are welcoming Jesus, honoring Jesus, worshiping Jesus.

The welcome we extend to one another and the welcome that we extend to others is a powerful way of honoring and adoring God. What could be a more compelling rationale than that?

The mutual welcome we extend to one another doesn't erase the differences and distinctions among us. Welcome and hospitality do not produce a veneer of uniformity or even conformity. Rather they set the stage for respectful conversation.

The current issue of *Christian Century* says it well in its editorial about the culture wars around such issues as abortion, sexual morality, capital punishment, and gun control, to name just a few of the hottest such issues. "The problem with the culture war is not that it is wrong to fight for one's beliefs. Rather, the culture war is a problem because in an all-out war, opponents become enemies to be defeated at all costs. In a war there is little incentive to search for middle ground or to make alliances on other issues. ¶The culture war has been especially debilitating to Christians, who make the unusual claim that those united with Christ are also united with each other in Christ's body, the church. If that is what the church is, then Christians will always encounter in the church people with whom they disagree—but are bound to keep talking to." (*Christian Century*, January 27, 2009, p. 7)

"You are very welcome here." With the words that are extended to everyone coming to Corrymeela, the Corrymeela Community is engaging in a form of witness and worship of God. A central part of the Corrymeela ethos is to extend the radical welcome of God to everyone. There is no judgement. There is no distinction. There is no division. Everyone is included in the radical welcome of God. And with those introductory words, the stage is set for meaningful dialogue, conversation and respectful debate—something at which Corrymeela has come to be very good.

I hope that as we continue to embrace hospitality as an emphasis in our ministry here, we will hone our ability to extend a similar broad and inclusive welcome that points to God's radical welcome.