

The Welcome Table

Leviticus 19:34

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When I was 19 years old, I was a student at the University of Texas at Austin. I was a math major for a while, but then I changed my major to German. Looking back, it makes no sense at all. But I was 19, and my German professor was really good looking. I had a little bit of a crush on him. So, I changed my major and set out on a life that has since been shaped by reading and writing and language.

My parents supported this academic shift by giving me the gift of a summer trip to Germany. In those days, if you flew with Lufthansa Airlines, they would help you find a summer job in Germany, so I worked for three months as a chambermaid in a residential Parkinsonism clinic in the Black Forest. No one there spoke English, and their German was heavily accented – not at all the German I had learned in college classes.

Nothing felt familiar to me there. The days that the shops were open. How to find food on my day off. Where to bathe. Asking for help was painful. I didn't want to seem disrespectful when I asked someone to repeat something. But I never, ever understood what they said on first try, and I really needed to know where to put the dirty linens or how to get from the clinic to the village. Language was not the only problem I faced. The people I worked with simply understood the world differently from me. Things that were common sense to me looked entirely different to them. It was summer, and I wanted ice in my tea. They said it would make me sick to drink anything so cold.

My classes had always come easily to me, but this was different. It was really hard. In fact, it was the hardest thing I had ever done, and I probably had a scowl on my face the whole time, from the sheer effort it took to live in a foreign place and try to understand a language that I thought I knew, but did not.

Despite my awkwardness, the people I worked with were very kind to me. When it was time for me to leave at the end of the summer, they threw a little dinner party for me in one of their homes. There was German music and classic German foods and warm good-byes. I still felt like a stranger in a strange land. I longed for home. But I was so grateful for their kindness to me, their willingness to welcome me, and I never forgot that lesson.

The Book of Leviticus tells us that we are to welcome immigrants as though they were born here, and love them as we love ourselves, because we, too, were once strangers in a strange land. This passage refers to the time that the people of Israel had spent in Egypt, before Moses brought them out of slavery and across the wilderness to the Promised Land. It is a lesson for all of us. We have all felt far from home at some point in our lives. We have all been out of place or out of time or out of step with everyone around us. We have all felt lost and alone, unable to cope, homesick for another time, another place, something familiar and comforting. The Bible tells us we are to remember those moments when we meet someone who is different from us, someone who is far from their own home, a stranger. We are to welcome them as though they belong here, because they do.

The last few weeks we have been learning about the things that make the United Church of Christ unique, different from other denominations – our belief that God is Still Speaking, that experiencing God's unconditional love Transforms Lives, and today, our commitment to Extravagant Welcome. Now,

there are many churches that pride themselves on being welcoming. Sometimes that welcome comes with an asterisk – everyone is welcome EXCEPT. Except people of a different race. Or gay people. Or transgender people. And often, those who add asterisks to their welcome find some sort of grounding in scripture. I am so glad that the United Church of Christ, and our congregation, have removed all those asterisks. It is a commitment we have made, even though, sitting as we do in a homogeneous community, we don't have as much opportunity as we would wish, to welcome people who are very different from us. Still, we remember, as our scripture today reminds us, that we have all been strangers in a strange land at some point in our lives, and we want to extend to others the same hospitality that we have needed ourselves.

Our commitment to Extravagant Welcome is visible most clearly at the communion table. Our positions about who is welcome are very different and often very strict. I say this without any disrespect to other churches, but only to point out the differences among us. There are many churches that offer communion only to members of their own denomination. If you show up in one of those churches on Sunday morning as a member of the United Church of Christ, you would not be able to receive communion there. Some churches require confession and absolution before you can receive communion. Some require baptism. In many churches, children must complete a class before they are welcome at the table. Or only those who have been confirmed may receive the elements. The rules in different churches are different, and people in those churches find the basis for these rules in scripture or in centuries of church tradition or in their understanding of God's will.

In the UCC, the choice of who can receive communion is made by each congregation, but as a denomination overall, we have an absolutely open communion table. This is a scripturally based choice. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus offered the bread to Judas, just before the betrayal. If Jesus could welcome Judas to this table, who are we to turn anyone away? This is Jesus' table, after all, not ours. So, everyone is welcome here – everyone who is hungry in body or in spirit – children who are just learning to eat at the family table and patriarchs who have been presiding here all their lives. Jesus welcomes the faithful, the doubting, and the curious. There is plenty for everyone. This meal is an expression of God's boundless love for all of God's children.

That is good news for all of us, because we all need to be welcomed at some point in our lives. We have all been strangers in a strange land, a long, long way from home. We have all been homesick and heartsick and lonely. God calls on us to remember those times and to give to others what we needed then – open arms, open hearts, and a place at the table. What a joy it is to share this meal with everyone God calls to be here.

Thanks be to God for a place at the table! Thanks be to God that there is enough for all!

Amen