

1 Corinthians 6:12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

15 What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

17 But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted,

18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

19 I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

21 So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death.

22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 10:40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Sermon: Welcome

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear, and through your Holy Spirit help us understand. Amen.

Every week, at the beginning of our services, I repeat the same words: whoever you are, were ever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

I did not invent this saying; it comes from the United Church of Christ, the denomination to which we belong. This is part of the God is still speaking campaign which began almost four years ago. The United Church of Christ began this campaign as a way of raising awareness of who we are as a denomination.

A major part of our identity is that we are welcoming.

The United Church of Christ has a long history of being a welcoming denomination.

What does that mean? What does it mean to be welcoming?

Does this mean that we welcome people to join us for worship on Sunday mornings? Does it mean that we welcome people to join us for fellowship and refreshments after the service? I think for many people those are the first things that they think of when they hear the word welcome.

What does it really mean when we say whoever you are wherever you are on life's journey you're welcome here? What does it mean to be welcoming?

We have, as a denomination, welcomed people of color, native Americans, women, gays and lesbians, as full members, as well as opening two of them positions of leadership. The main reason for this is our belief that God has called us to love one another without exception.

This has been a rather difficult position at times. During the abolitionist movement many of our churches stood up for the rights of blacks. Many churches stood in solidarity with those who believed that Africans brought here to be slaves were free as God made them. In some cases this divided churches.

Some felt that taking a stand of that kind would be political, and that that kind of politics did not belong in the church, or they believed that God in fact had made some people inferior to others.

Others maintained that it was not political but was in fact a reflection of God's will that all people should be free. There are still a few instances of churches in New England where there are two churches in the same town, one which was abolitionist and the other which was not, they divided over this question.

Today those churches have resolved their differences and have come to see that the abolitionist movement was in fact a reflection of God's love and welcome to all people.

In the case of women, many of the same kinds of arguments occurred, and still occur today. When women first sought leadership positions in churches they were often told that it was inappropriate for them to hold such positions, because in the Bible there were no female apostles or disciples.

A closer reading of the scriptures, however, helps us to see that women were very much a part of the early church.

Many of my older clergy friends, when they attended seminary, had to deal with this debate. In the 1970s this was the major debate on seminary campuses around the country. Should women be given all the rights and privileges that men had to hold leadership positions in churches? Even within some churches today, the same debate is still going on.

I had female friends in seminary who had left their denominations to join the United Church of Christ because their gifts to ministry were not respected. One of my friends in particular, Suzanne, had been a member of a Southern Baptist church, and when she began seminary it was clear that she would never be ordained as a Southern Baptist minister.

Many of our congregational churches, up until recent memory, had two boards where we now have one. The church would have a board of deacons, the committee charged with overseeing the spiritual life of the church. This board would consist of men. A second board, called the deaconess board consisted of women, and often had an ancillary role similar to, but not equal to, that of the board of deacons. They might oversee visitation, write cards and notes, and take care of the flowers in the church. Here at First Church, those two boards were merged into one within the last 25 years.

Today, I'm not sure that we could see how we would possibly ever think of not having a board of deacons consisting of both men and women.

Today a major debate is around sexual orientation. Should gays and lesbians be offered a full welcome into the life and work of the church? This debate is occurring not only in our denomination but in others as well. And on seminary campuses, this remains one of the big questions for our day.

If it would be nice to jump ahead 25, or 35, or 50 years, to see where the debate will take us. But in the meantime we must decide what it means to be welcoming.

Who is welcome? How do we welcome? These are the questions of hospitality.

In her book, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, Christine Pohl shows that hospitality is clear in both Old and New Testaments. The people of God are aliens and strangers whom God has welcomed into the "household of faith." In turn, God's people are to "make room" for the stranger, not only in the community of faith but also in their own personal households. This is the biblical meaning of hospitality—making room for the stranger, especially those in most acute need.

In this context, hospitality is more than simply a question of who is allowed to participate in the church.

Hospitality is implicitly subversive in the way it shatters social boundaries, especially those boundaries enforced by table fellowship. When we eat with the lowly and welcome strangers and "sinners" to our table, we topple social expectations and bear witness to the kind of love God has for all God's creatures.

When we eat together, we are proclaiming God's love. When we offer breakfast to all, that is a sign of the breaking down of barriers that keep person from person. Who is welcome for breakfast?

It is not coincidental that Jesus perhaps most scandalized his critics in his practice of table fellowship. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners"—this was not a compliment. And it was precisely the radical nature of Christian hospitality, Pohl shows, that characterized the early church, helped spread the Gospel, and healed the dramatic social barriers that initially confronted the church as the Gospel permeated the Greco-Roman world.

The connection between hospitality and Jesus is indeed rich and mysterious. As Pohl shows, in New Testament perspective Jesus is simultaneously guest, host, and meal. He is guest whenever we welcome and care for the stranger, the outcast and the broken (Mt. 25:31-46).

He is host, for example, when he hosts the Last Supper, during which "we . . . celebrate the reconciliation and relationship available to us because of [Jesus'] sacrifice and through his hospitality" (p.30)—and when he will host the Great Supper in the Kingdom. And he himself, as our paschal sacrifice, is the meal we eat, not only in Communion but in ongoing Christian experience as we feed on his life to nourish our own.

He is also guest.

How do we welcome right here in First Church? How do we offer hospitality? Do we offer welcome to each person as if he or she was Jesus?

This is an important part of hospitality: how we welcome the stranger.

When new people come to visit this church do we find them sitting alone at coffee hour? Or do we go and say hi? Do we include them in the passing of the peace with an enthusiastic "may the peace of Christ be with you"? Are they welcome for breakfast?

This relates to another kind of hospitality: how we reach out to those who are in need. How do we treat the least of these? Building a habitat house, taking food to loaves and fishes, or providing assistance in any number of ways helps us to show the love and welcome of Christ to a world in need.

Remember, Jesus said: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

There are many ways to show hospitality in this world.

In our reading from the gospel today Jesus says “whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”. Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. I think this is an important piece of hospitality. Welcoming Jesus is perhaps the beginning of all other forms of hospitality.

Do we welcome Jesus here? Do we make a room in our hearts to welcome the one whom we claim as the head of the church? Do we make space and our lives to prepare a place for Jesus to reside, not simply on Sunday mornings as part of our worship but in every moment of everyday? Do we allow Jesus to transform us inside until we are truly loving?

Do we welcome each day as a gift from God and thank God, thank Jesus for all that we have?

Do we remember to give thanks when we receive the gifts of food at least three times a day?

Do we end to each day remembering that this day was a unique gift given to us by our creator, and thank Jesus for being among us?

Do we look at each person that we meet each day the way that Mother Teresa did trying to see the image of Christ in every person?

If our hospitality of welcoming others into our church or reaching out to others in the name of Christ is to mean anything, we must also be sure that we are offering hospitality to Jesus in our lives because when we welcome him we welcome the one who sent him.

Once we do that, we may be able to live out that call that says whoever you are wherever you are on life’s journey you are welcome here.

Welcome is the cornerstone of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to love because Christ first loved us. If we begin there, we become a true reflection of very good news revealed in our savior Jesus Christ: we are welcomed, we are forgiven, and we are loved.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.