

**Sunday, June 28**  
**Parkside Community UCC**  
**Saukville, WI**  
**Led by Rev. Susan Drake**

**Prelude**                      **“Cares Chorus”**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Call to Worship**

Oh Wonderful God we quiet our hearts and minds to make ready our spirit to welcome you.

**We welcome you, Oh God.**

We let go of our fears, our resistance, resentments, our anger, frustrations, and opinions to make room for you.

**We welcome you, Oh God.**

We clear out the clutter, the dust, the attic, the basement, the baggage, the overflowing closets of our soul to make room for Your Joy, Your Peace, and Your Infinite Love.

**We welcome you, Oh God.**

**Invocation**

Inside of each of us there is a special place where we invite God in. We sit exhausted and we find rest here. We are inspired and healed in here in God's light and grace. We worship, we praise, we speak our gratitude and just feel the Holiness of each moment. Come Holy Spirit Come welcome to the place in us that is only for our God.

And the People said: **AMEN**

**Celebration of Graduates**

**Scripture Reading**

**Marla R.**

**Matthew 10:40-42**

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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; 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**

### *What Does Welcome Even Mean?"*

Well to answer the question I pose in my title right off the bat, technically it means to "receive" in this particular scripture. He who receives you receives me. There are 59 occurrences of this word in the new testament alone! We know as well that throughout the Hebrew text that welcoming the stranger is paramount in many of the stories.

According to Webster, the definition is anywhere from politely greeting someone, to extending hospitality and making sure a person's needs are met.

Okay but what does it mean in spiritual and ecclesiastical terms. In other words what does it mean to a church to practice welcome, to receive people? What does it mean as Christians to welcome people?

Henry Nouwen said "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

That's powerful stuff. What does that look like for a church? Well in my opinion, for the most part you are already doing it but Nouwen takes it even farther and asserts that true hospitality can only be offered by those who have found the center of their lives in their own hearts.

What I hear in that is that you have to work out your own stuff before you can truly welcome others. To love yourself, to talk nicely to yourself, to feel solid in the fact that you are loved by God, warts and all and then extend that to others. Otherwise welcome is just another word.

I know what a phony welcome looks like. We have been welcomed to churches before on the surface but no one really took the time to get to know us and there was this underlying unspoken social contract that we were welcome as long as we didn't act too differently from them. We have certainly felt welcome here, really truly embraced.

But what about if someone walked in with rainbow hair and those giant holes in their ears and a thousand piercings and tattoos. We need to search our hearts on these things.

Everybody that is anybody outside of the norm can tell heartbreaking stories about thinking they were welcome when really they weren't.

Asian Americans coming to church only to be asked over and over again what country are they from. "... umm... this one?" they reply. "No I mean where are you from from." The inference being that they aren't really American even though their family has been here since the 1800s.

Or the person with mental illness that everybody is happy to accept as a new member until she cries all through the service and then everyone avoids her afterwards.

Or the Mom that needs church but can't bring her adult son with disabilities to church because people complained last time that he was disruptive to their ability to connect to God in worship.

Here is what I would like us to think about and discuss ad nauseam. I would like us to picture every imaginable situation and ask ourselves how could we truly "welcome" or "receive" someone? Truly live into

our O&A status. Whether it is ethnicity, health, ability, legal status, poverty, or sexuality.

Or if it is different politics cuz this stuff is getting real folks. We are unraveling as a country and we have to figure out what Jesus would want us to do, Jesus who talks about receiving, welcoming each other because, he says when we welcome others we welcome him and when we welcome him we welcome GOD!

There are a lot of confusing things in scripture but this is not one of them. If we are to be followers of Christ we are to be in a constant state of welcome. Ready to receive people exactly the way they are, no qualifiers, just like God does for us.

We can't pretend this is easy, to do so is to gloss over human nature with a veneer of polite disdain.

And it means working at not getting defensive... I have really had to work at that. I was talking to a friend of mine who happens to be a therapist. (I highly advise everyone to find a friend like that because you can save a ton of money). But I was talking about how when I feel bullied or attacked or shamed in a situation my primal internal reaction is to attack back.

She said "Susan you know our initial reactions as humans to threats are always going to be fight or flight. You always tend to move toward fight in your spirit but you have learned over time to move toward prayer at the same time and God intervenes, softens your heart and allows you to hear and see the pain behind peoples anger.

You all did some hard work and had some losses when you boldly proclaimed yourself open and affirming. But what is known now is that the vote is just the beginning. It is a statement that we don't know everything about what it is like to be different but we are sure going to try and learn.

The key to being welcoming is accepting those initial impulses in yourself as human, ancient protection mechanisms that encounter “other” as a possible threat and to override them in the moment with internal prayer. ***“God this person makes me uncomfortable so can you take it from here? Can you bring down my walls and create in me a welcoming space”?***

It is how we can evolve out of this gross and ugly space we are in as a country and as a world. It isn't easy but it is a place where we can experience beautiful growth in our relationship to God. To own that we need God to overcome our fears of people different from us welcomes God even further into our inner landscape.

***And to accept that we are wired to resist differences welcomes God's love and acceptance for us even deeper into our souls and when we do that-- change happens, growth happens, true transformation happens, true welcome happens. Our ability to accept others is directly proportional to our ability to accept ourselves.***

The one thing I dislike about how we have to take scripture piecemeal is that we don't often get to see how all this stuff he says works together. This scripture is pulled from an entire sermon.

If we hear it all at once we better understand that Jesus is talking about an entire way of being where all that he is teaching works together to help us to get closer to God and to each other.

These things are all interrelated. Not judging, forgiving, loving, welcoming and allowing God to empower us so that we can do all those things.

When we don't judge we are more able to welcome, when we love, we can't help but forgive. Welcome is then an interdependent way of living in this constant circle of non judgment, forgiving, loving, welcoming.

Like Jesus said loving our neighbor as ourselves and loving God with all our heart, soul and mind. It all works together or perfectly when we rely on God to take hold of us, surrender our impulses, our hearts and our minds and be forgiving of ourselves when we get it wrong. When we can't remember the alphabet soup of LBGTQRSTUVWXYZ. Or when something comes out of our mouth before we have a chance to run it past God.

And ask for forgiveness from the ones we offend. I have had so many beautiful moments when someone has come to me sometimes years later and asked my forgiveness for something they did or said. They opened themselves up to the spirit and evolved to a place where they understood why I might have been hurt by what they said or did.

May you all feel that Joy of being welcomed by God and by others, just as you are and may that Joy give you the ability to truly deeply welcome others. AMEN

**Song of Reflection** "Dream God's Dream"

### **Prayers of the People**

Oh Holy one, what a week we have had! Help us be present in the midst of all that is with loving hearts, compassionate hearts, hearts bent on welcoming everyone, even when we are weary. Spark in us moments of joy that keep us going, moments of compassion that keep our hearts soft to others. We pray for the family and friends of Bob D. today as they lay him to rest. Be with them in their grief. Lord in your Mercy...

### **Hear Our Prayers**

**Are there others with prayers of concern or gratitude?**

**Loving God, repairer of all breaches, wisdom behind all words that heal and make us whole and hopeful, help us to lean into you not our fears for answers, help us to lean into love not hate to define our**

**actions. Help us to be instruments of bringing about your kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven, where everyone is whole, loved, and has enough... like Jesus taught us in this prayer.**

**Lord's Prayer:** Our Creator who art in heaven hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen

### **Blessing of the Offering**

#### **Benediction**

**Make ready your hearts to welcome everyone you meet this week. Shine a light that says "you are welcome here, I will not judge you or try to change you, I will just love you the way you are." AMEN**

#### **Postlude**