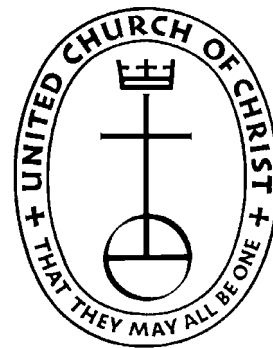


# A Community of Extravagant Welcome

A Sermon By —  
JERALD M. STINSON  
September 27, 2009



This sermon encourages us to go beyond being a “friendly” church and become a truly welcoming one. Welcoming strangers into our community enriches us, and being a community of extravagant welcome recognizes the presence of God in every human being.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,  
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*  
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson  
September 13, 2009 (#1374)  
Reading: Genesis 18:1-10; Luke 24:13-19, 28-31

First Congregational Church  
(Long Beach, California)

## A COMMUNITY OF EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME

A Hebrew storyteller told a wonderful tale about Abraham and Sarah:

*Our God appeared to Abraham by the oak grove at Mamre, while Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Looking up, Abraham saw three travelers standing nearby.*

*Abraham ran from the entrance to the tent to greet them, and bowing to the ground, said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by our tent. Let some water be brought that you may bathe your feet, and then rest yourselves beneath this tree. Let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves. Afterward, you may go on your way."*

The story went on to describe the preparations for an elaborate meal for the strangers and it also said that the strangers were in fact messengers from God with the news that Sarah would give birth.

Abraham offered three strangers a truly extravagant welcome.

There's also a story in the Christian scriptures that speaks of a welcome. It is a resurrection story. Don't worry about whether the events really happened – focus instead on the welcome.

*Two of Jesus' disciples were making their way to a village called Emmaus, discussing all that had happened as they went. While they were discussing these things, Jesus approached and began to walk with them, though they were kept from recognizing Jesus, who asked them, "What are you discussing?"*

*They stopped and looked sad. One of them, Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened these past few days?"*

*Jesus said to them, "What things?"*

[Then the narrative continues with the disciples telling this stranger about the crucifixion and the empty tomb. Then it continued...]

*By now they were near Emmaus and Jesus appeared to be going further. But they said eagerly, "Stay with us. It's nearing evening – the day is practically over." So Jesus went in and stayed with them.*

In this case, it was the disciples whose welcome was extravagant, who convinced Jesus to stay with them.

The church is called to be a community of extravagant welcome; each of us is to "be the welcome." Tina Datsko de Sánchez's poem calls to us: "Be the welcome you wish to receive. Let radical acceptance wash through you like a flash flood. Greet all beings who show themselves to you, inside or outside, with honor and love. God's arms are wide enough to embrace all. Be those arms."

That's our challenge – to be the arms of a welcoming God.

In a sermon a couple years ago, I talked about a time when I received an extravagant welcome.

In the 1970s, when I lived in Botswana, an African minister and I stayed with a local family while attending a meeting in a village. One of the daughters in the family rose before dawn to build a fire to heat water so we, the guests, could wash when we arose. The whole family gathered around as they served me breakfast – what they thought Americans ate: a cold fried egg prepared the day before and cold spaghetti straight from a can. What's important is the effort they made to find food I would enjoy. An extravagant welcome!

In the northern part of Israel, some Palestinians are actually citizens of Israel – third-class citizens. In 1965, more than 100 small Palestinian villages made up of those Palestinians who are Israeli citizens were simply left off the maps of Israel. They became "unrecognized villages," and in the early '80s Israel prohibited them from obtaining sewers, schools, water and electricity.

This August, I visited one of those villages, Remya, now totally inside the city of Karmiel which was founded for Russian immigrants with the declared purpose of "Judaizing" the region. Karmiel was built on land expropriated from several Arab villages, including thousands of acres of fields, olive groves, and some of the best marble quarries in the country.

Arriving at Remya, I thought we were at the city's garbage dump. I couldn't see that it was a village. But it is. A number of Bedouin folk live in very simple dwellings, keeping their animals nearby.

All 23 of us in our delegation crowded into one home. We were served bottled water, a precious commodity in that village, and then Turkish coffee. It was an amazing welcome by these poor, oppressed people; an extravagant welcome!

Now, I think all faith communities want to be welcoming. Tony Robinson, who led our congregation in a long-range planning process a few years ago, wrote about the desire of churches to be “friendly.” But he says that often means being friendly to people like us – from our social group, from our educational and economic background, and with our kind of lifestyles and values. He says, “When we find compatible people, we deem the church to be friendly, comfortable and a ‘good fit.’”

But ultimately that will make the church a kind of club. He says, “The danger is that in our close-knit fellowship, our friendly church, there is no room for God, who comes to us as the stranger, the outsider ... who is, often as not, intrusive and disruptive.”

So instead of seeking to be a friendly church, I think we must practice hospitality and become a church of extravagant welcome.

Ana Maria Pineda, a Maryknoll sister, says each of us has a real need for communities of acceptance and affirmation. We need to be welcomed into communities where we are cared for and can care for others, where we are nurtured and sustained even as we nurture and sustain others.

She says, “This is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others.” When we lose a job, when we move, when we face illness or grief, when we are frightened or depressed, we need a community of extravagant welcome.

Recently Kay and I returned to Carlsbad for the funeral for a long-time member of the church I previously served. During the open-mike part of George’s service, a woman said she had only been coming to that church for a few months. Amidst some difficult personal struggles, she needed a real “community” of faith. On her first visit, she was warmly greeted by George and Shirley who were sitting in the pew behind her. She sat in the same place the next Sunday, hoping they would again sit behind her.

George, always a quiet person, was quite ill, but every Sunday as he moved into his pew he would lean over and give her a little kiss on her head. She said that’s why she calls that church her home. A little kiss to one who needed community became an extravagant welcome. George was able to “be the welcome.”

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote an article in which he talked about one of his friends who was raised by missionary parents in Africa. The friend had almost given up on Christianity and even considered taking his own life. He had known from an early age that he was attracted to boys, not girls. As an undergraduate at an evangelical college, he went through so-called reparative programs to be delivered from his homosexuality. But, of course, nothing worked. He was gay, and thus not welcome in most Christian churches.

He sought community with other gay men, but something was missing – he needed a faith community. Wilson-Hartgrove says, “Almost by accident he stumbled onto a Christian community where he met people whose faith seemed different. They were trying to live their whole lives by the Sermon on the Mount. They served alongside the poor and tried to love one another.”

Wilson-Hartgrove said, “My friend thought that maybe this kind of living together, living the way Jesus taught, was what he was made for. But he was cautious. What would they think of his homosexuality? (In) a private meeting, he put that question to a leader in the community. The leader’s response: ‘I don’t know what that will mean for our journey together. But I will say this: you are a gift, and we want to welcome you as one.’”

They welcomed him as a gift to them from God and twenty years later, Jonathan’s friend is a leader himself in that same community.

Now, if there is a basic human need for community, it also seems there is a basic human fear of strangers.

Again words from Roman Catholic Sister Ana Maria Pineda: “Just as the human need for hospitality is constant, so it seems is the human fear of the stranger. The stranger seems to portend danger, sometimes of physical harm but also because the stranger represents the unknown, a challenge to the familiar constructs of our personal world. So we human beings try to keep strangers at a distance.”

That’s why most congregations are made up of people primarily of one race, one level of education and income; they are either straight or gay in orientation.

But I think there are two reasons why as a faith community we must get transcend those fears of the stranger – two reasons to be extravagant in our welcome.

**First, welcoming strangers will enrich our own community.** Thomas Ogletree who teaches theological ethics at Yale Divinity School, said, “To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar and unknown into our life world.

Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations.”

Quaker writer Parker Palmer conversed with a New York taxi driver who spoke broken but enthusiastic English. The driver told him, “You never know who’s getting into your cab, so it is a little dangerous. But you meet a lot of people. You exchange ideas and you learn from a lot of people. It’s like going to school. If you only like one kind of people, it’s no good. If you’re with the same kind of people all the time, it’s like wearing the same clothes all the time – you get sick of it.”

That driver’s taxi became a place of extravagant welcome. Palmer said, “Truth is a very large matter and requires various angles of vision to be seen in the round. It is not that our view is always wrong and the stranger’s always right, but simply that the stranger’s view is different, giving us opportunity to look anew upon familiar things.”

Frank Wong, former Provost at the University of Redlands, said, “We seek not a community of the lowest common denominator where differences are tolerated and sometimes sullenly accepted, but rather a community of the highest common denominator where difference is an enriching resource that leads us to a fuller understanding of what is universally true.” So welcoming strangers will enrich our community.

**Secondly, a community of extravagant welcome recognizes the presence of God in every human being.** Sister Pineda, talking about undocumented immigrants, said, “To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God’s image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves.”

And Tony Robinson wrote, “The practice of hospitality is at the heart of the biblical faith because, as the letter to the Hebrews put it, ‘In welcoming the stranger, you may entertain angels unawares.’” You see, the presence of God’s love, of God’s justice, of God’s peace may come through the stranger, the guest, the visitor, the new member.

So when someone new walks into this sanctuary, we each need to become the welcome, the extravagant welcome. We must let people know that they are accepted here just as they are, and we must make sure that is true.

We must welcome people into a community of learning where there are no dogmas and where all can participate knowing their ideas will be respected.

We must welcome people into a community of caring where they can not only be cared for, but can also have the joyful experience of caring for others.

We must welcome people into a community of serving where we reach out to strangers in need through our Drop-In Center for the homeless and our Summer Day Camp for children in poor neighborhoods in downtown Long Beach.

And we must welcome people into a community of advocacy that seeks to build a more loving, just and compassionate world.

You will soon be invited to share in the sacred act of Holy Communion. Everyone is welcome to participate. People look at this ritual in many different ways – some see it in its historical setting remembering Jesus' life; others see it mystically as the body and blood of Jesus; others simply see it as a human enterprise, a kind of community love feast. No matter how you find meaning in communion, you are welcome at the table. You are welcome if you are gay, straight, lesbian, transgendered or bisexual. You are welcome no matter what the color of your skin or what language you are most comfortable speaking. You are welcome if you feel strong and healthy today, but you are just as welcome if you come with disabilities, illness, worries or fears.

So come to the table; feel welcome there, and on this Homecoming Sunday, may we commit this faith community to being extravagant in its welcome. Remember Tina's words:

*Be the welcome you wish to receive.*

*Let radical acceptance wash through you*

*like a flash flood. Greet all beings*

*who show themselves to you, inside or outside*

*with honor and love. God's arms are wide*

*enough to embrace all. Be those arms embracing.*