

“Radical Welcome”
A Sermon by Alex Jensen
First Parish in Wayland
Sunday, January 31, 2021

(Singing.) *How could anyone ever tell you / You were anything less than beautiful? / How could anyone ever tell you / You were less than whole? / How could anyone fail to notice / That your loving is a miracle? / How deeply you're connected to my soul?*¹

I love this hymn so much not only because it speaks to the core of what we're exploring today--what it means to be radically welcoming as a community. It's also a hymn that became an anthem for me in my UU teenage years; challenging and affirming years of growing into a greater sense of my own identity as a queer person.

Hearing this hymn for the first time as we sang together on a Coming of Age retreat--a group of teens, hands clasped in a circle under a cathedral of ancient California Redwoods--this message of unconditional love and acceptance hit home for me. It was a time in my teenage years that I felt that I didn't have to be anybody else. That all that I was and was becoming was seen and cherished. I felt deeply connected to the souls of my peers just as it was affirmed in me that I was nothing short of beautiful and whole.

Moments like this created a spiritual home for me in Unitarian Universalism. In fact, I felt such a strong, potent message of welcome that I recognized within myself that I was called to bring this to others through my life and ministry. You see, I first knew what it was to belong because I belonged in Unitarian Universalism. It was this faith that would bring me comfort and community in the wake of some turbulent chapters of my life. This message of love, belonging, and inclusion would eventually give me the strength I needed to accept my own sexuality; to recognize that there wasn't anything wrong or broken in me. It would help me to swallow my fear as I hit the little blue "post" button on the social media post that would be my coming out on the car ride home from General Assembly, after marriage equality had become the law of the land.

What we have to offer the world and one another is such a powerful and needed message, especially now more than ever. This morning, in our annual Welcoming Congregation service, we're continuing to ask ourselves what it means to lean into radical hospitality as a community. In light of January's theme, "Taking Measure," we're given this opportunity to take stock of who we are and how we welcome others.

Last year, First Parish reached its goal of renewing its Welcoming Congregation status. We had a great amount of participation in the Transforming Hearts² module, where many of you were eager to learn more about inclusive practices for queer and trans people. It made me so proud, too, that First Parish also held a greatly successful virtual Trans Day of Remembrance Vigil this past November, where we had upwards of twenty participants on the call, many of whom were trans and queer folks who had never been to First Parish before.

¹ *Singing the Journey*, Hymn #1053, "How Could Anyone".

² Transforming Hearts Collective, <https://www.transformingheartscollective.org>.

And in our current national moment of continued violence and systemic injustice against Black, Indigenous people, and people of color, we've asked ourselves how we might live out our faith and stand up to protect Black and Brown lives. We haven't been asleep to these questions and conversations. In fact, I think we've been eager to engage.

One of the ideas that we talked about in *Transforming Hearts* back in September last year is this idea of intersections;³ how people are living their lives at the meeting points of different identities and experiences. For example, someone who is a Black queer woman holds different intersections than a white able-bodied man. The way we experience these intersections is compounded. The intersecting oppressions in society often times build, where a person has to navigate social groups and systems knowing that parts of themselves are accepted—*or not accepted*—depending on the space.

In my own lived experience, I live at the intersections of being white, cisgender, male, and gay. In some areas of my identity, being white and male, I hold a large amount of privilege. I don't have to worry about walking into a store and being followed around for being seen as suspicious. Or my voice in most spaces isn't questioned or second-guessed on account of my maleness.

However, there are intersections where I experience oppression. In many public spaces, I have to ask myself if it's safe enough to hold hands or show affection with a date, or if how I'm dressing that day might be putting me in danger. I have to sift through social interactions and do the mental calculus of wondering if it's safe enough for me to be "out," or if it's better that I not make that part of my identity known. And in some spaces, because I am a gay man, I'm not seen as "man enough;" my masculinity is called into question, as it often is in all-male groups and spaces.

Although each one of us lives at different intersections, I think this is a familiar experience to each one of us. At some point in our lives, we are confronted with questions about whether we belong; Whether it's safe enough for us to let our guard down or to be open. We're having to ask ourselves: *Do I really belong here? Am I really welcome to bring my full self?* And tragically sometimes we ask ourselves: *What part of myself might I have to leave at the door?*

The greater question I have for you this morning is, *what would it take to make First Parish a community where every person might feel welcome to bring their fullest self? What might it be for us to create a growing table of welcome, where we are aware of both who is seated at the table and who has yet to pull up a chair?*

In our reading from this morning, from the UUWorld article "The Spiritual Practice of Hospitality" by David Rynick⁴ that Lynne read so beautifully, we see the act of hospitality and welcome reframed as a sort of spiritual practice.

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 1989, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1052&context=uclf>.

⁴ David Rynick, "The Spiritual Practice of Hospitality," 2007, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/the-spiritual-practice-hospitality>.

As Rynick writes, “Practicing hospitality expresses our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. Through our actions of hospitality we move towards creating a world in which we are all treated with justice, equality, and compassion... We may have little control over conflicts in another part of the world, but we can practice truly honoring the preciousness of all human life by how we enter into relationship with each other. If we are serious about creating a more just, equitable, and compassionate world, we have to start with the room we are in...”.

I think First Parish is serious about living out radical welcome in all that we are and do. And I am so proud of the strong commitment you have shown each week to making this welcome wider. If we understand hospitality and welcome as ongoing practices, things that we do that we’re working to improve much like practicing an instrument or learning a new skill, we become open to seeing the work we have yet to do.

The words we say matter. The message we convey with our actions, both the subtle and overt cues of welcome we give as a community are important. This is reflected beautifully in the piece “Words Matter,” written by the Rev. Carol Cissel,⁵ a Black Unitarian Universalist Minister, who writes, “A sense of being acknowledged and valued moves from heart to head... My heart blooms. I feel like the Welcome Table has been set for me, and I am eager to pull up a chair....”.

Rev. Cissel speaks about how we so often put words like “Diverse, Multicultural, Inclusive, and Welcoming” in our Orders of Service and on our websites, and yet many of our communities are still longing for greater diversity and inclusion. What’s important is that we work to ensure that we are fully aware of what these words mean. Seeing our role in practicing welcome and hospitality, especially to those who are most at the margins of society, is one way we might live out the promise of these important words. This must be an active and ongoing process, unless we risk making these words empty promises; words we say we are about and still have yet to act on.

In our Time for All Ages story this morning, the story *Red* by Michael Hall⁶ that Jada read for us, a crayon who is really blue inside goes through the painful experience of being told he isn’t good enough. He goes about life entering spaces where his blueness is overlooked and undervalued. It’s not until the crayon makes a kind friend, someone that welcomes him to be his bluest self—to draw out the bluest whales and oceans—that he finally understands that he belongs. At first, there wasn’t space made for the blue crayon at the table; the things the others said about his failure to be red; going about being mislabeled and unseen, stung deep.

Like the blue crayon experienced once he was affirmed in all that he was, bringing all of his blue self with him, our faith, too, has a saving message for people who are told each and every day that their worth and dignity as human beings are up for debate. We have the opportunity to be a sanctuary, a refuge where someone is welcome to shed their fears and false labels and to be exactly as they are.

⁵ Carol Thomas Cissel, “Words Matter,” <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/promise-and-practice-words-matter-reading>.

⁶ Michael Hall, *Red: A Crayon’s Story*, 2015.

Our life-saving message is too precious to be locked up in empty words of welcome. We must see pursuing radical welcome as a spiritual discipline, a vision that isn't ever fully complete but is something we are dedicated to working at over and over again.

So what are some ways that we can further live into radical welcome? How especially do we do this as a global pandemic rages, when community as we once knew it is virtual?

One of the first ways is to really engage in the conversation. I've been so impressed with the ways that folks here at First Parish have been eager to join Zoom book groups and participate in social justice. Finding opportunities to be involved and grow what you know is huge in learning about the ways we might be more inclusive as a community.

Today after the service, you also have an opportunity to join in our visioning conversation around the lessons we have learned from the pandemic about ourselves, our larger communities, and the world around us. And also, coming up on February 28th, Rev. Stephanie is preaching about Beloved Community and the proposed 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism,⁷ which is another chance for us to talk about our community and its growth toward greater inclusion.

Some other small ways we can extend our circle of welcome, even online, is to welcome newcomers in coffee hour, to be a friendly and warm presence in breakout groups, and even to follow up with these new connections outside of the service with someone you don't know. While we aren't able to be with one another and linger in the vestry in-person, we still have the chance to welcome new folks to our community who are joining us.

Likewise, another simple thing we can do—like we had talked about last year when I preached on the differences between equity and equality⁸—we can include our pronouns next to our names in the Zoom name bar. This is something you often see next to Stephanie, Kate, Matt, and my self's names. While we miss our physical nametags where many of us had started to write our pronouns, this is a beautiful sign and gesture to transgender and non-binary folks who are visiting us that we value them. That ours is a space where it is safe, that you will be valued and honored with the pronouns you use.

I want to return to my own story, singing with a circle of teenagers on a Coming of Age retreat beneath the redwoods. For me, I was lucky that Unitarian Universalism held me and loved me as I was, in all of the intersections of my identity. I understood at a deep and fundamental level that I belonged and that I was welcome to bring my fullest self. It breaks my heart that not everyone has this experience in our communities. We have such a powerful vision and message that we have no choice but do better. There's a whole world out there that needs to hear it.

⁷ "The 8th Principle of Unitarian Universalism," *The Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective*, <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org>.

⁸ Alex Jensen, "UN Sunday: Why Equity?," 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gd5Q80Ib7c>.

So, may we be a community that, despite our virtual walls, continuously strives to widen our welcome. To welcome the stranger. To bear witness to the many injustices facing our world. As we continue in these next weeks and months, may we be open to taking measure of who we are and who we are called to become.

May we be ready to love one another in all our fullness; to create a place at the virtual table for all who would share in our community... for those who are most in need of our live-saving and life-affirming message.

May it be so. Amen.