

The First Mark of Discipleship: Welcoming and Offering Hospitality to Others

The Reverend Peter Cook
First Congregational Church of Burlington
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Luke 15:1-10

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This morning I would like to preach on the subject welcome and the lost sheep phenomenon. Welcome and the lost sheep phenomenon. This sermon is the first in a series where I will discuss with you six marks of discipleship. Today I will talk about the first mark. Disciple's welcome and offer hospitality to others.

The idea of welcome is central to our Christian faith. To be a welcoming person is a mark of what it means to be a faithful Christian. As it says in the book of Hebrews, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some I have entertained angels without knowing it." When we think about the importance of welcome, I think we can begin by honoring our bodies and the bodies of other people. When we baptize a child we say as strongly as we know how that this child is wholly perfect, no matter their sex or complexion or physical condition. We recognize that the child is profoundly loved and created in the image of God. In baptism we celebrate the divine truth that no human being can ever be called junk. When the water was splashed on our heads the community gathers around us to say that through no effort of our own we were wholly embraced by God.

Baptism is the Christian church's oldest and most powerful symbols of welcome. Through baptism we testify to the sacredness of our bodies and all of human life. Baptism

is the most radical and revolutionary symbols of Grace and welcome that the world has ever known. As a matter of fact, Baptism is the Christian church's very first open and affirming statement which says that no matter our race, our nationality, our physical ability, our age, our sex or our sexual orientation, that we are created in the image of God and are wholly and wonderfully made and accepted.

Our bodies are a sacred gift. Unfortunately and tragically, the powers of evil and death, for as long as we can remember, have worked overtime to tell us that some people's bodies are just a little better than other people's bodies. In our world sometimes, we are taught in many ways to dislike what God has created and spend our days hating ourselves and wishing we were different.

I can remember as a boy being very thin and somewhat gawky and wishing that I was more muscular like other kids. It was torture during PE when it was time to do pull ups and I remember how often that did not go so well. I was rather self-conscious about my body. Many of my peers were also self-conscious including those who were not skinny or who wish they were thinner. I can remember when my son was a young teenager, like his father, he was a little wispy and persuaded his mother to purchase some Muscle Milk at the store so he could beef up and not feel so embarrassed when he went to the gym. Muscle Milk.

I think about young women who spend their days wishing that they were a size six and disliking their own bodies as they peer at the perfect picture on the cover of *Seventeen* magazine. Or if you could appear on the cover on *Seventeen* magazine people might judge you more by how you look than by what you think. In some religious circles only men get to serve as priests. Lest mainline churches get too smug, it was not so long ago in churches that you had male deacons resign and leave the church when women were invited to serve communion.

For others we know what it is like to be judged because of our race. We know what it is like to walk across the street and hear the car door locks click because some drivers have been so conditioned to fear a person based simply on the color of their skin. African American parents tell their sons not to run in public for fear they might get shot.

And then there are also people among us who know what it feels like to have left the town in which they grew up, because their friends and even family had so much struggle accepting you because you realized, as woman or a man, that you were attracted to people of the same sex and could not force yourself to be heterosexual. I have also known people including one of my own relatives who realized that they were really a man in a woman's body. The despair she felt as she struggled to befriend this truth was quite immense. But she is now a man and is a happier person.

There are people who have facial features that make them appear they are from the Middle East, who must endure the subtle discrimination of some who assume you might be a terrorist or be un-American. There are people who have from birth suffered from Spina Bifida, or Down Syndrome, some of us might not have as quick a mind than other, and live every day in the shadow of a culture which glorifies a perfect mind and body

what ever that is. They labor under some twisted biblical teachings that people with disabilities are that way because their faith is not strong enough.

Sometimes our age can become a challenge. Some of us, as we near retirement age, may find one day that our job has been given over to someone who is younger. As we leave our boss' office with our pink slip--that boss who is 30 years younger than we are-- we wonder if things would have been different if we had colored our hair or got some Botox. We then go to some church looking for solace only to hear church leaders obsess about how we need to get some younger people in here so the church will be vital again.

I think in so many ways people are lost because they dislike their bodies or feel they must change or contort themselves in service of some preconceived image of perfection. Many have experienced profound discrimination because of their bodies and just the way they look.

We experience what I might call the lost sheep phenomenon which Jesus described. You remember the lost sheep right? Did you ever wonder how that sheep might have felt when the sheep encountered the 99? That sheep has strayed away from the 99 because he or she did not feel they fit in or would be accepted. And the 99, perhaps because they had their own insecurities about their own status or bodies, would heap their judgment on that lost sheep which reflected their dislike of themselves.

Over the years many of you may have come to know a man named Jean Vanier. Jean Vanier founded the L'arche communities which offers a place of welcome, hospitality and love to those who are severely disabled. The residents at L'Arche all have immense physical and psychological challenges. Many have endured much hatred and discrimination because of their physical and mental impairments.

But Vanier, who began his career by living in community with two men from an insane asylum in France, envisioned creating religious communities for people with mental and physical challenges all around the world. In these L'arch communities for the severely disabled, the residents and people who work there create powerful feel of welcome by honoring the body. In fact for Vanier, the body becomes the primary locus for genuine welcome because so many L'arch residents do not have the mental capacity to visualize a community organized around words or an abstract intellectual ideal. In L'arche communities, all that the residents have are their bodies, wholly and wonderfully made, and the experience of touch.

L'arche communities teach us something about the Christian faith by honoring the body. When we honor the body, we are invited not to contort our bodies into something we are not or cannot be. Instead, we come to learn that we can be at peace with our bodies and the embodied selves of others.

When we honor the body, we no longer engage in self hatred or project the hatred we have towards ourselves onto the lost sheep in our society. Instead through honoring the body we begin to experience the beginnings of the authentic experience of welcome and community.

Welcome through touch and honoring the body is a powerful faith expression of what it means to be a Christian. Through our bodies we profoundly embrace the incarnation and the physicality, humanness and yes the brokenness of Christ, the suffering and disabled servant who dealt with much ridicule and discrimination in his own life.

When we honor and respect our bodies and the bodies of others we accord to one another a profound form of hospitality which is true to our baptism.

When we honor the body we are no longer the lost sheep but can count ourselves among the found. When we become more at ease with our bodily differences, the color of our skins, our gender, and our sexual orientation, we begin to create a culture according to Jean Vanier, “which is no longer a culture just of competition, but a culture of welcoming where tenderness or touch is important and is not either sexualized nor aggressive. It has become human. This is what people with disabilities are teaching us” says Vanier. “It is about how to be human to relate and to celebrate life together. When we have reverence for the body, then the spirit can rise up.”

How is it, do you suppose the spirit can rise up in your life and in this community of faith? As Disciples of Christ, we are called to so profoundly love others even if it may be a struggle sometimes for us to do so. In fact, we derive pleasure and meaning for our lives through our welcome.

Instead of hiding through Facebook, our cell phones, our texts, and our e-mails where our bodies are one step removed from others, let us set these things aside in order to enjoy the sacredness of our neighbor and our beloved.

We are also invited to get out into our community and be present to others whether it is at a pride parade or visiting someone in their home who is not well or is discouraged. In befriending our bodies and the bodies of others we deeply honor the truth that Christ was fully human and came to dwell among us.

Together as community and individuals we welcome others as if we were welcoming Christ himself. And in so doing the spirit rises and we become a new creation all together. Amen.