

“Widening Our Warm Welcome”

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Church of Roanoke

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Welcome, welcome.

I would love for all of us to spend just a moment bringing to mind a time you felt really welcome. By a person, maybe by a place. The history of the word “welcome” is from Old English, the original word *wilcuma*, which means “one whose coming suits another's will or wish.”

Call to mind a time when the way you were received made it feel like you were suited to the wish of another. Imagine! “It’s like I hoped someone exactly like you would come through that door today!” Just exist in what that feels like for a moment.

I’m going to tell two short stories, while you think about that warm feeling of welcome. Both these short stories happened while I was traveling for an interview. Before I came to Roanoke, I searched for other ministry jobs. On one particular trip, I experienced both a profound sense of welcome and a sense of a kind of thoughtlessness that felt almost like welcome’s opposite. I will start with the part that didn’t feel welcome, and end with the welcoming part.

Now please understand I’m not telling this story to blame or shame anyone, but to articulate what it felt like to not be

considered. While I was visiting the town where I was interviewing, I was taken on a tour. Historical spots were pointed out, restaurants were enthused about, stories were told. At one point, after we had been driving for an hour or so and had seen only single-family homes, I asked about the availability of rental properties and apartments. The people interviewing me were stymied. They knew they lived in an area with a high cost of living, but their response showed me that they hadn't given consideration to the idea that a minister might not be ready to buy a home, or that they might have to rent a home on the salary they were offering, or that they might be a single-income household. Again, no one did this out of spite or judgement! Every person was very kind! But there was a space here where they had not been thoughtful.

Later in that same trip, we traveled to another local church for a now-discarded tradition, preaching in a "neutral pulpit." (This practice has been discarded since so many churches now have virtual services, so that people considering a possible minister can experience their preaching that way.) The minister of this church offered me an expansive yet quiet welcome that came as a balm to my soul. I was thought-of. I was regarded. Have you heard the expression, "I feel seen"? Well, this minister made me feel seen. They were my elder both in age and in ministerial experience, but the way they listened to me and answered my questions honestly made me feel both respected...and expected. As if my coming suited their wish!

"i want you to know
i honor the choices you made in solitude

and i honor the work you have done to belong
i honor your commitment to that which is larger than yourself
and your journey
to love the particular container of life
that is you”

When I read this poem - this blessing - this [spell](#) by writer, activist, and facilitator adrienne maree brown - I experience that sense of welcome. I hope that everyone here, members new and old, non-members, friends, visitors, occasional attendees, the curious, the questioning, the unseen but not unacknowledged online participants - I hope that all of you have experienced that kind of welcome in your life. I dare to hope you may have felt that kind of welcome here, while also understanding that we do welcome imperfectly. Because we are human, and we do everything imperfectly! But I hope we do it with presence, with kindness, with curiosity.

Curiosity - that’s one beautiful way to consider how welcoming we are, whether as a group or an organization or as an individual.

“One whose coming suits another's will or wish.” What if I told myself, every time I was about to meet a new person or walk into a new place - “Someone in there could be waiting to meet someone just like me!” What if I told myself, “This new person coming to meet me, or coming into a place I love, might be someone I would never have thought to wish to meet - but suddenly, I’m excited by the prospect!”

Once, in the long preparation for my ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister, I underwent a series of psychological and temperament tests, to determine if ministry was a profession that would suit me. (Spoiler: The tests said it was!) I remember very little specifically about any of those tests, but I do remember one question clearly: “Do you cultivate a sense of expectancy without having specific expectations?”

Wow! Did I? Do I? Do you?

What if every time we entered a new place or met a new person, we were greeted by someone who had a great sense of expectancy... and when they met us, they didn't look disappointed (“You're not who I expected”) but instead curious and interested (“Now I get to discover what is fascinating and fabulous about this person!”).

So think about what it feels like to be welcome. Think about what it feels like when you don't feel disregarded, but seen and considered - expected, in a nonspecific way.

And once we start thinking about blessing people in this way - make no mistake, it's a blessing to feel seen and to feel considered - we start living into the promise of who we are. As individual people and as a people, a group who are seeking and questioning and doubting and loving and fighting for light and justice and wellbeing for all, every day, imperfectly but beautifully.

“you are enough
your work is enough

you are needed
your work is sacred
you are here
and i am grateful”

When we can extend this kind of grace and welcome to others, and when others extend this kind of grace and welcome to us, we can do an amazing thing.

We can grow past welcome. Welcome, after all, is a word - much like its close cousin, hospitality - that is based around a host and guest relationship. What happens here - what we all hope and strive to have happen here - is we aspire that our welcome will be warm enough that people will want to stop being guests, and start feeling like they belong here. And when I feel like I belong somewhere, then I feel empowered to welcome others.

This isn't a plea to join our Connections Team (though by all means, please do if you feel called! You can ask Chris or I any questions you'd like!), but rather is an invitation to think about what you feel open to doing when you have accepted and internalized that sense of welcome. What do you feel empowered to do? What does it feel like to you when you move beyond a sense of welcome and into a sense of belonging?

As we welcome more and more people into this beloved space, I wonder how curious we can be about how more and more people can feel not just welcome but as though they belong? Is there something we might simply not have thought of, that might be what another person needs? We don't have to be psychic! We

have to be curious and open to hearing what the needs of others are, and to take those needs seriously. And we're absolutely going to mess this up, because - as noted! - we aren't psychic.

I like to think about cultivating this sense of thoughtful welcome - part of the path to belonging - the way Wendell Berry [writes](#) about the very first flowers of spring.

“And in this long season
of machines and mechanical will
there have been small human acts
of compassion, acts of care, work
flowerlike in selfless loveliness.
Leaving hope to the dark
and to a better day,
receive these beauties freely
given, and give thanks.”

The small human acts of compassion and care are the kind of work that is flowerlike in “selfless loveliness.” When we offer welcome, may that offer shine beautifully as it is freely given. When we receive welcome, may we give thanks, because that beauty will shine through, erasing the imperfections and leaving only loveliness behind. In a hurting world, it is a tiny but radical act to approach each interaction with a sense of welcome, a sense of curiosity, a sense of expectancy, and fully ready to give and to receive grace. Each of you is a gift. Thank you for your welcome to me, to each and every person here, and to all those you haven't yet met. Let that light inside you shine.

So may it be!