



## BEYOND WELCOMING

A Sermon by Rev. Fritz Hudson

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First Unitarian Universalist Church, Rochester, MN

Our mission: "To be a . . . welcoming community." We say it on the top of our service bulletin every Sunday. In fact, at least in my hearing and seeing, we say it many times, in many places, and in many ways throughout each week around here.

We have a "Welcoming Committee." It began, if I've heard the story well, to focus our energies to support for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. Over my 15 months in our ministry, I've seen it expand its concerns to supporting people of all classes as well. Who among us has been a member of the committee or participated in some effort it sponsored?

We also have a "Hospitality Council" with Hospitality Teams. Their "mission or purpose," our Board has declared to be, first and foremost, to "facilitate the development of a congregation that welcomes guests." Who among us has been a member of the Hospitality Council or a Hospitality Team or has participated in some effort they've sponsored?

Last winter, over 90 of us gathered on Saturdays in January to cast our visions of how we want most to fulfill our mission during our time together, in this interim ministry. Do you remember the array of colored squares we posted with those visions on the south wall of the Commons? Though spread across the four dimensions of our mission, the largest number of those visions, more than a third of the total, were colored blue. They were our visions of ourselves as a Welcoming Community. Who among us attended those workshops?

On this annual day of welcoming for our Guests at Our Table, I would like to explore three questions with you:

1. What is the root of our commitment to be welcoming?
2. How have we grown in our understanding of that commitment in recent years?
3. Where might it lead us today, in our time and the time into which we're entering? Might it, in fact, lead us somehow beyond welcoming?

So, what is the root of our commitment to welcoming?

This fall, our first and second graders, our Trailblazers, are being led in their Sunday spiritual growth by a team composed of four dedicated church members. Overall their program is called "Creating Home." And today they're hearing the story of the new home that was created for the very first Universalist minister who came to American soil. The year was 1770. The minister was John Murray. The home was created in a place called Good Luck, on the New Jersey shore, by Thomas Potter.

John Murray was born England. His father was an ardent follower of the Wesleys, the founders of Methodism. As a youth, John became a preacher in that movement. He grew into manhood, married, and had a son. But in London, he heard James Rely preach of God as perfect love, the love that must eventually save all humanity, the doctrine of universal salvation. Preaching this doctrine led to John

Murray's ex-communication from the Methodist movement. Then came personal reversals. His son died. His wife died. He was placed in debtors' prison. Released by a friend, he resolved to go to America to start a new life. He had no plans to preach here. He was too dispirited.

Anyone remember where Murray's ship, *The Hand in Hand*, was supposed to land? It was New York.

A storm blew it off course, though, and ran it aground off the Jersey shore. The crew said they would have to wait for the wind to change and blow them back out to sea, so John Murray volunteered to take a rowboat to shore and look for food. He came upon a man preparing fish to cook. He asked the man if he could buy some. The man replied, "I don't sell fish. I receive them freely and so may you." The man's name was Thomas Potter. He gave Murray enough fish to feed the ship, but he asked Murray, after he'd delivered the fish, to return to spend the night in his home.

And that night, Potter told Murray of a building he had on his land, a chapel. It was there for any preacher's use who passed through, to bring whatever teachings might help him and his neighbors. Potter had built it, though, hoping that someday a preacher would come "of a different stamp." He hoped for a preacher of God's love and its salvation for all humanity. Murray said he believed in that love.

So, Potter asked him "Can you say you've never preached?"

Murray answered, "Well, a little back in England, but I've come here to make a new and different life."

Potter pressed him, "Well if the winds don't change before Sunday, and you're here at least till then, will you preach in my chapel?"

Murray said, "Well OK. If the winds don't change."

And did those winds change? No. Murray preached, and . . .

Who remembers the radio personality Paul Harvey? If Paul Harvey had told us this story, what would he say now? "And now you know the rest of the story . . ."

We are the rest of the story.

This is the root of our commitment to welcoming. We were planted here in the conviction that God's perfect love will eventually save all humanity. That's the Universalist spirit. We welcome all to our chapel exactly as Thomas Potter welcomed John Murray, 246 years ago, in Good Luck, New Jersey.

So, now, how have we grown in our understanding of this welcoming spirit?

Who among us thinks you've read or heard of a book entitled *Radical Hospitality*? If you were attending this or any other Unitarian Universalist congregation about a decade ago, you almost certainly have heard of it. When I prepared to speak on it from our Lincoln, Nebraska, pulpit back

then, my Google search of "Unitarian Radical Hospitality" pulled up sermons from all over our UU world.

The book was not written by UUs, though. Its authors were Daniel Homan, a Benedictine Roman Catholic Priest, and Lonni Collins Pratt, a Methodist layperson. It was their direct response to the September 11 attacks of 2001. It was published in 2002.

It draws a parallel between the chaos of that time and the chaos in which St. Benedict lived, in the time following the fall of the Roman Empire. It speaks of the dangers of that time, of highwaymen on the road who literally murdered almost any traveler who spent the night unprotected. Saint Benedict responded by disciplining his followers to provide safe haven for travelers in monasteries.

Homan and Pratt saw the dangers of Benedict's time as far more present and constant than any threat we had from possible terrorists. And they saw the disciplines which Benedict's Rule demanded of his followers, to bring safety to his time, as exactly the disciplines that our post-9/11 world demanded of us, to bring safety to that time. The book's subtitle is "Benedict's Way of Love."

Radical hospitality, deeply rooted hospitality, must first get beneath what most often gets called hospitality in our current culture.

- It is far less saccharine than the pampering of hotels or cruise ships.
- It is far more demanding than entertaining family and friends in our home.

As Homan and Pratt put it, "One model makes [hospitality] an industry....The other model relegates it to the domain of housekeeping—safe, cozy—rather than risky and world rattlin'" (p.10).

They go on. "Merely being nice to people does not fulfill the deep requirements of hospitality" (p.21). "The missing virtue of our era has been turned into a social grace that neither disturbs nor transforms" (p.14).

Radical hospitality can only transform us, can only transform our world, if it disturbs both. And its requirements, I think, come down to two.

First, radical hospitality requires that we understand and embrace a fundamental distinction. We must distinguish companionship from intimacy. Companionship is what hospitality requires. It does not require—it does not even expect—intimacy. Homan and Pratt write, "It requires respect without trying to be a person's best friend" (p.139). Companionship is what arises from no more than the very act the word's Latin roots capture - it arises from having bread, *pan*, together, *co*.

Homan and Pratt write, "What we give to each other in hospitality is an outer self, but not a false self" (p.185). "What we give to others is the acceptance which creates peace" (p.147). "Acceptance is about receiving without judging. Acceptance is not about condoning; it is about embracing (p.xxvi).

Homan and Pratt even acknowledge that radical hospitality might not, in fact, get us close enough to another, physically, to actually have bread together. "Hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human" (p.12).

*Opening yourselves to the stranger is not equivalent to leaving your door unlocked and bringing strangers into your home. Hospitality does not mean you ignore obvious threats to personal safety. Hospitality means bringing strangers into your heart, which may or may not result in inviting strangers to your table. (p.21)*

So first, radical hospitality requires us to learn the disciplines of embracing without intimacy, the discipline of effective acceptance.

And what's its second requirement? Homan and Pratt write, "The fundamental skill of hospitality is exactly the opposite of that of proselytism – it is not preaching, it is listening" (p.213).

It is learning who another is—acknowledging, accepting him or her as they are. On the one side, hospitality is far more than listening with mere tolerance. On the other side, hospitality is far less than listening with approval. Rather, say the authors, it is "Listening from that deep reservoir of appreciation for the wonders of life—the same place that weeps at the sight of a newborn, the same place that falls silent at the edge of a mountain, the same place that reaches for a falling sparrow" (p.220).

"The root of hospitality is gratitude" (p.159). It is paying forward what you know you've received. Last Sunday our Worship Associates explored the thanksgiving that pays forward. That was an invitation to re-enter the discipline of radical hospitality.

And this is how we have grown in our understanding of our welcoming spirit.

So, finally now, where might this spirit lead us today, in our time now and in the time into which we're entering? Might it, in fact, lead us somehow "beyond welcoming"?

Like Benedict's time, the Dark Ages; like our post 9/11 time, our own Age of Fear—we have been thrown again into a time of unsettling uncertainty. So far, at least, the actual harm has not yet become that of the ancient marauders on the highways or the twin towers' fall. But the British vote to exit the European Union, the American vote to entrust our Presidency to Donald Trump, and the rise of similar spirits in votes soon to be cast in Austria and France clearly call us to re-learn and deepen our practice of radical hospitality, to extend our welcoming spirit.

Three weeks ago, on the Sunday following our election, I invoked the third element of our covenant as Unitarian Universalists—"to promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth"—to call forth our most faithful response to Donald Trump as a person, independent of our response to him as a candidate or our president-elect. Again, for practitioners of radical hospitality, "Acceptance is about receiving without judging. Acceptance is not about condoning; it is about embracing" (p.xxvi).

On that same Sunday I spoke of how our vision for our nation and for our world, as embodied in the elements of our covenant, stands in direct judgment on the vision Donald Trump's candidacy projected.

Our vision is of a nation and of a world where the affirmation of dignity and worth is guaranteed to EVERY person—of every gender or gender expression, of every ability, of every culture, of every national origin.

Donald Trump's candidacy promoted violating the physical integrity of women, mocking persons with physical disabilities, barring entry into our country to persons of Muslim culture and faith, expelling from our country persons of Mexican origin.

Our mission to be a welcoming community; the seed of our faith brought to life in Thomas Potter's chapel by a loving God whose spirit can only be fulfilled in saving all humanity; our schooling in radical hospitality as the practice of embracing acceptance and grateful listening—all of these call us, in these times, to extend our spirit beyond these walls, to go beyond "welcoming guests in," to invest in "putting ourselves out" beyond welcoming.

I will tell you again what our prophet Margaret Fuller told her father Timothy Fuller, the Boston Brahmin Unitarian, back in the 1840s:

*Your reluctance to go "among strangers" cannot be too soon overcome; [And] the way to overcome it, is not to remain at home, but to go among them and [to] resolve to deserve & obtain the love & esteem of those who have never before known you. With them you have a fair opportunity to begin the world anew. (Mark Harris. Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History. p.9)*

On that Sunday following the election, when I first read you Fuller's call, our Welcoming Committee Co-Chair spoke to me about somehow promoting the "Safety Pin Campaign." The Safety Pin Campaign calls on all who wish to publicly proclaim our commitment to protect the safety of those threatened by the ascending spirit of these times—to protect women, the disabled, Muslims, Mexicans—to wear a safety pin prominently on our person.

This week my colleague Deb Cayer, at our church in Durham, North Carolina, posted the story of her friend on her church's website. The friend was on an annual weekend with eight other women in her family. One night, they'd had a bit too much wine and came up with "a really good idea." The next morning, they found themselves fully sober, and with full intention and great commitment, in a shop where each got a tattoo of a small blue safety pin on her arm. "These women, and their commitment inked forever onto their bodies," said Deb, "finally broke my heart wide open."

I'll have to work myself up to a tattooed safety pin—that's a challenge for my spiritual growth. For now, I know I can do better than wearing only this timid little pin, the only one I could find in our townhouse this weekend. And if, in the daily discipline of donning the larger pin I WILL find this week—in the putting it on and the taking it off my changing clothes each day—I clumsily prick myself from time to time, so much the better.

Radical hospitality, beyond welcoming, can only transform us, can only transform our world, if it disturbs both.

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