

“We Bid You Welcome” ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

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I love Gretchen Haley’s story. I too have had experiences in chaplaincy that made me very uncomfortable. At the National Institutes of Health, I sat in the waiting room one day with a young woman who had travelled from across the country to find out if any of the experimental protocols could offer her hope. The answer was no. She talked a little, cried a little, then asked if we could pray together. I said yes, and took her hands in mine. Then she started to pray. A prayer that I would never have uttered, that came from her born-again evangelical soul. When she finished, she looked up, embarrassed, and said, “I’m sorry. You’re the chaplain, I should have let you pray.” I assured her that her prayer had been most meaningful for both of us. She looked amazed and then said, “Imagine that. Me coming all this way, getting this bad news, and I witnessed to you!” Imagine that indeed. As I read Gretchen’s story, I empathized with her trying to minister with integrity in a context that challenged her theology, her personal spirituality, and her comfort level! I’m glad she shared her love story. That’s what it is, a love story.

A story about something that comes from the heart. You fall in love. And fall and fall and fall. You love and your heart breaks open and your soul surrenders. I fell in love decades ago, as some of you know. A few days ago Barry and I celebrated our 43<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary. We’re still in love, still falling, falling, falling. Our story, and Gretchen’s, are not just stories of love. They are stories of vulnerability. Love and vulnerability go hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. It is the necessary interrelatedness of love and vulnerability that made me choose Gretchen’s story as the basis for a sermon about the monthly

theme of welcome. What does it mean to be a people of welcome? It means both loving fiercely, falling in love with humanity repeatedly, and being vulnerable to all the risks and promises that fierce love exposes us to.

Scott Tayler, Soul Matters founder and director, writes, “Welcoming is most often associated with “bigness.” We speak about “expanding the circle” and making more room. We talk about make ourselves larger through the practice of welcoming in new experiences and new ideas. But there is also the work of becoming smaller. And sometimes that is the even more important work. For instance, those of us who are white are learning that true welcoming of diversity just can’t happen until we shrink and de-center our voices. We also know that expanding community and welcoming newcomers requires right-sizing our needs and putting our preferences second. Welcoming regularly involves the smallness of humility and willingness to listen and learn. The great spiritual teachers remind us that the key to feeling at home in the universe is seeing ourselves as a tiny but precious part of a greater whole, rather than believing that the whole world revolves around us. Downsizing and living simply allows us to welcome in more experience, adventure and peace. And, of course, there’s also the work of downsizing our egos enough to admit mistakes, ask for forgiveness and welcome in the work of repair. Bottom line: There is a deep spiritual connection between the smallness of self and the expansiveness of relationship. It’s a curious and wonderful truth: the road to widening the circle often starts with limiting our own size. By becoming smaller, we paradoxically are better able to welcome in and receive the gift of more.”

To be a people of welcome means that we find ways to de-center ourselves, make ourselves smaller, make room for those people still waiting to come in. It means, and I want you to take a deep breath before you hear this – it means that

you do not have the right to sit in the exact same pew every week. Somebody else, somebody brand new who doesn't know the secret handshake or the unwritten rules, may sit in what you think of as your pew. The only welcoming thing to do is to walk right up to them and greet them warmly, then sit elsewhere. Or sit next to them, but further in. To be a people of welcome means that on Sunday morning your first obligation is to talk to new people rather than connecting with old friends. I know. You only see each other on Sunday and you have so much catching up to do. But first, you need to make sure that our visitors are warmly welcomed, that you and your usher and greeter friends are not having conversations that create a bottleneck at the back of the church preventing others from coming in, not standing with your back to the person who arrived here this morning hoping against hope that somebody will look them in the eye, smile at them, and make room for them in the ebb and flow of our busy Sunday mornings.

To be a people of welcome means expanding the baseline of acceptable church music. It means letting the sanctuary be filled with the vibration of African drums, and giving in to the impulse to move with the beat. It means encouraging parents to let their kids jump out and joyfully move their bodies to the drummer's music without worrying about the disapproval of their pew mates. Now you know that since my arrival I have provided more than one opportunity to dance in the aisles. Some of you have taken advantage of those opportunities. Some have declined, which is fine. And some have let me know that you disapprove. Think about what it is that makes you uncomfortable with this more embodied approach to worship. Can you lean into that discomfort a bit, like Rev. Haley did?

What might we learn about ourselves if we embraced our discomforts? All of us have them, those moments where we think, "OK, I'm all for diversity, but now we've gone too far!" In your discomfort, consider the possibility that what is

making you cringe is breaking open the heart of somebody else in the sanctuary, making them feel whole, letting them know that they are truly part of this beloved community. Lean in, friends.

After the service today I will be lunching with a group of you who are going to undertake the revitalization of our Membership and Engagement and Outreach Teams. We have been working with a model for understanding how people develop a relationship to a congregation that was developed a couple of years ago by Carey McDonald, who is currently the chief operating officer of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I won't tell you all about his model, but I will point out that the goal of the membership process is integrated leaders, defined as individuals who participate in the life of the congregation in such a way that they are changing the community. There is no growth without change. Or, as we interim ministers are fond of saying, "Change is inevitable. Suffering is optional."

Years ago, when we first joined the UU church in Arlington, VA, there was a small index card taped to a pole in the middle of the crowded and noisy room where they had their after-church social hour. On this index card somebody had hand-written, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." As an introvert, and brand new to the congregation, I found that little index card very comforting. I sought it out every Sunday as I bravely headed downstairs to try to meet people and get comfortable. At least one anonymous person must have known that I had something to offer, I thought to myself. The person who wrote that love note to me. Not just to me, I know! But it felt that way sometimes, in the beginning, when I wondered anybody would make room for me. See me and hear me. Recognize me. Welcome me.

What does it mean to be a people of welcome? It means that we are always entertaining angels unawares. I want to close with another story. The origin of this

story is unknown, probably ancient, but it was recounted by Scott Peck in his book *The Different Drum*. The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. The reasons don't really matter. One day, as the abbot of the monastery agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the nearby hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

Peck writes, "The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant." In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He

has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I? As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So

within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.”

So there it is. What does it mean to be a people of welcome? It means falling in love with the messiah among you. Even the annoying one. The smelly one. The one who talks too much and the one who stands against the wall hoping against hope that somebody will notice them. The one who dances and the one who disapproves of dancing. The one who prays to God and the one who is allergic to the word God.

If we are to succeed in growing our congregation, we all have some falling in love to do. Falling, falling, falling. And some leaning into discomfort. Leaning, leaning, leaning. But it's worth it, all the vulnerability and all the risk and all the discomfort and all the change and all the fuss. Because truly, I say unto you, you will thereby entertain an angel unawares. Let it be so. Amen.