

“Welcome As Worship”

Rev. Mary Gear

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First Reading: An excerpt from “The Power of Welcome in an Age of Loneliness” by Jennifer Bailey.

We’re living in what’s been termed “the age of loneliness”: we’re more connected than ever before, and simultaneously, more isolated. We bemoan the deterioration of conversation as we spend more time looking down at our screens than up at the people we’re talking to. But, really, the problem is that we do not give ourselves permission to talk about the things that truly matter. One of our biggest sources of resilience in combating loneliness is what psychologists call “common humanity”: the degree to which you see your struggles as part of the human experience. “To feel less lonely in your stress, two things help,” writes Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal. “The first is to increase your awareness of other people’s suffering. The second is to be more open about yours.”

Second Reading: “Marginal Wisdom” by Leslie Takahashi

They teach us to read in black and white.

Truth is this—the rest false.

You are whole—or broken.

Who you love is acceptable—or not.

Life tells its truth in many hues.

We are taught to think in either/or.

To believe the teachings of Jesus—OR Buddha.

To believe in human potential—OR a power beyond a single will.

I am broken OR I am powerful.

Life embraces multiple truths, speaks of both, and of and.

We are taught to see in absolutes.

Good versus evil.

Male versus female,

Old versus young,

Gay versus straight.

Let us see the fractions, the spectrum, the margins.

Let us open our hearts to the complexity of our worlds.

Let us make our lives sanctuaries, to nurture our many identities.

The day is coming when all will know

That the rainbow world is more gorgeous than monochrome,

That a river of identities can ebb and flow over the static, stubborn rocks in its course,

That the margins hold the center.

Sermon/Homily: Welcome As Worship

This is a story about welcome. When I remember a time that I felt welcomed, a person came to mind who is a master at it. My friend, Wendy Fish, welcomed me into her home, and into ministry. Wendy is a fellow Unitarian Universalist minister and was my mentor throughout my ministerial formation and for the first 3 years of my ministry. Wendy believes that ministry is about welcoming, and she is excellent at it.

One example. I arrived at Wendy's home late one evening after a very long day of ministry that was difficult in many ways. I was looking at another day just like it coming up. The weather was awful, rainy and cold, I was tired, and mostly I just wanted to be home. Wendy opened her door, ushered me into the room where I would stay, showed me where the bathroom and extra linens were, and said, "Please settle in and take your time. I have tea and something to eat if you like. I'll just be doing a few things in the

kitchen. Please take your time and take care as you need. ” And then she left, closing the door behind her.

I am certain that Wendy saw me, tired, cold and wet. Knowing Wendy, she likely even knew that I would have preferred to be home. For me, her most precious gift was that she gave me a bit of time to settle, to regroup, and breathe so I could return to the present. I felt welcome.

Right now, I invite you to engage your memory and imagination for just a moment. Settle where you are and take a breath.

Now call to your mind a time when you felt welcome. When have you felt welcome? It could have been visiting a new place, a friend’s home, a different country, a new church. It could have been starting a new job or meeting a new service provider, like a hairdresser or barber. Has there been a time when you’ve felt welcome?

Then when you have this time present in your mind, notice what it was that made you feel welcome. Just name a few words—what someone did or didn’t do, what was present in the surroundings. What about the experience helped you feel welcome? Now, how does that memory make you feel? Warm? Happy? Seen? Name a few feelings.

Please hold on to this memory and these feelings. You’ll have the chance to share in the breakout rooms later or consider sharing it with someone today.

Our spiritual theme for this month is welcome, one of the six words in the new OUUC mission to welcome and wonder, embrace and empower, bridge and become. For a bit of history, you, the congregation, crafted this mission in an effort / that began / about this time last year. The Board enlisted UU minister, Jake Morrill, to help us through the process of identifying a new vision, mission and ends or goals for the congregation. It had been a while since the last ones were done. Through a months-long process you

reflected and discussed, sending a writing team off with lots of material to use to draft new language. Using the values you identified, such as connection, inspiration, and transformation, the writing team proposed and you adopted a vision of an interconnected world that is loving, just and healthy. You adopted a mission with those six words: welcome and wonder, embrace and empower, bridge and become. Our mission— those are the things that we do to bring about the world we envision, a world that is interconnected, loving, just and healthy.

Last Fall we explored the words in the vision statement, using one as a spiritual theme each month. This Winter and Spring, we'll do the same as we explore the words in our mission. For those of you who like order, I'll let you know now that we won't take the words in the same order as they appear in the mission statement; I took some license for how they fit with holidays and holy days in the next months. But I promise we'll get to them all!

So, we begin the new year with “welcome.” We say we welcome in order to help create the world we dream about.

What does it mean to welcome? When I consider that question, I recall wise words that were preached at my ordination almost 4 years ago. Rev. Kathryn Bert, one of my first UU ministers, turned to me as she began the sermon and said, “Mary, you know this service is about you and is not about you.” I think welcome is like that; it is about us and it's not about us.

Here's what I mean. In order to welcome, we have to have some sense of who we are. What do we value? We must know this in order to offer genuine welcome done with integrity, grounded in our deepest held values. We must understand why we welcome. What can we offer? How can we be generous? We can't offer everything, we don't have everything; what can we share? Not only our material possessions, but what about our feelings, even our suffering?

When Wendy welcomed me, she had a good sense of who she was, what she valued—generosity and hospitality, and what she could offer. Her welcome was genuine and real, reflecting who she was. She is crystal clear that her ministry includes welcome.

And, in order to welcome, we have to be able to step outside ourselves and notice the other. It's not just about us. Although Wendy was dry and warm in her home, having enjoyed a relaxed and calm day, she opened her door to a guest who had experienced a very different kind of day. She was able to set aside her experience and see me for who I was, where I was at that moment. She placed me at the center and I felt welcome.

Stepping outside of ourselves also allows us to connect to that which is beyond us, however we name it: Spirit, God, the Universe, Humanity, Love. This connection helps us remember what we value, the why of our welcome. We can put our deepest values at the center.

Like me, you may have been raised with the teaching of “The Golden Rule,” enshrined at the United Nations New York office by Norman Rockwell: treat others as you would like to be treated. This is a noble idea, suggesting that we treat others at least as well as we treat ourselves, using what we prefer as the benchmark. And that makes the welcome about us, puts us at the center.

I have shared before what I learned working in the disability community, which is The Platinum Rule: treat others as they want to be treated. This removes us from the center and places the other there. It doesn't remove us from the picture, we are still present to offer welcome! It simply asks us to step aside to make room for the wishes of the other, even if those wishes may not be the same as ours. It asks us to widen our circle, inviting the other into the center as we take a step aside.

For example, over the past few years, we have introduced ourselves using our pronouns. Many of us have embraced this practice that allows us to be in solidarity

against transphobia, bias against anyone who identifies as non-binary, queer or trans. For some of us, using pronouns is a new idea and practice, and for some of us it has been uncomfortable. I've heard stories from those in our community who directly experience transphobia, and who feel seen and supported for who they are when we use pronouns. We place them at the center. They feel welcome.

I have also heard stories from those in our community, sometimes the same people, who have felt disregarded and unseen when they were misgendered or heard jokes about pronouns. Something that may not have been part of the lives of some of us is a foundational part of the identity of others. For those of us who occupy the center most of the time, welcome means stepping out of the center to make room for the other, especially those who are on the margins most of the time. We all remain in the circle, making it wider, big enough for everyone.

Our story today told of a turtle and a spider; both of whom offered welcome, kind of, but who used welcome almost as a weapon. While they welcomed each other to their homes, they expected the other to be what they were: a turtle with clean feet like a spider, or a spider dining underwater like a turtle. It was a welcome that centered them instead of centering the other; a false and ingenuine welcome.

While we usually don't intend to be as unwelcoming as the spider and the turtle, we probably won't get it right all the time. Sometimes I need to be reminded to use pronouns; I was recently in a meeting, and I am grateful for the reminders and the grace.

When we gather in worship, we hold up what we value most; that's what worship means. From our values of connection, inclusion and love, we offer welcome so that we can help create the world we envision. So, when we welcome from our deepest values, we engage in worship. We are holding up and embodying that which we hold most dear. We sing "come, come, whoever you are" and by our behavior we reveal if we really mean it. Though we may break our vows a thousand times, we come yet again, come.

Welcome to the new year. May we greet it with open minds, open hands and open hearts.

Let's welcome our thoughts and feelings into a time of silence.