

Luke 4: 14-21: Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The scripture we heard this morning is a familiar one. It marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry; it proclaims what the ministry will be about; and most importantly it conveys hospitality and welcome to all of God's people. In this short beginning, we have all the ingredients of hospitality, the key concept of the Christian Faith. So often we think that Jesus came to save the sinner, to make people right with God. In this scripture we have a new way, a new beginning of the "salvation" message that is so often used for the work and mission of Jesus. In this scripture Jesus' explanation of his ministry makes it very clear that God is welcoming all people: the poor are no longer poor in whatever way they envision or experience poverty, for they are welcomed; captives are released from whatever is keeping them imprisoned and they too are welcomed. The oppressed are free from whatever is oppressing them, for they too are welcomed for this God in Jesus knows no boundaries other than extending the gracious, extravagant welcome and hospitality of God.

We begin today a three session seminar on Hospitality. We will learn by sharing and reading how we have experience hospitality and how we have experienced times when we felt uncomfortable and in situations where we experienced inhospitality. We'll share what we consider is good hospitality, what steps we take to make one feel welcome and how we provide for guests, versus how we provide for visitors. We'll relate this to God's hospitality and more specifically to how we at Salem, extend the hospitality of a gracious God and how we can extend it even more.

So often we have a limited understanding of welcome and hospitality. If we are having guests over for dinner we usually extend an invitation to them; we make sure the house is clean, fresh and neat. We greet them at the door warmly, take their coats and invite them into our home. At this point, hopefully preparations have been made for refreshments, drinks, food, conversations, shelter. An invitation was extended after all.

But let's change the scenario: let us say someone, a visitor, stops by unannounced. How is it you receive this person? Are you happy? Prepared? Do you feel annoyed? Inconvenienced?

There is a difference between a visitor and a guest. We welcome the guest because we are prepared. Growing churches have guests, not visitors, and refer to people as guests.

God's welcome to us is not as visitors, but as guests. God's welcomes us all as God's guests. The church, God's representation here is to welcome all as guests.

Once guests have arrived at our home, we provide sustenance. Again, as God's representation the church provides sustenance to the people and guests, in the form of ministries, programs, educational, service, spiritual, communal and fellowship opportunities.

The way into a church can be easy or difficult. The story is told of a consulting pastor to a small church. He was looking for a church that might consider selling its property. Driving by a church, he noticed that the lawn was brown, weeds were growing in the parking lot and the building looked broken and unused. He knocked at the door and was surprised when someone answered it. He inquired if the church and property was for sale. The individual was aghast. No the church was not for sale. I'm sure that individual told others that day.

Being welcoming begins even before someone enters the church. It begins with how we prepare for guests, how we take care of that which God has given to us, and what we have to offer.

True hospitality is always more than helping a friend or providing for the stranger, it is an attitude of heart "that moves over to allow true space for the other," writes Kathy Callahan-Howell in *Finding Home* (p. 67).

Even worship itself *is* hospitality. We do not gather ourselves; God gathers us; God invites us in. More fully, we are brought by the power of the Holy Spirit into a worship already taking place in the life of God. Worship is the primary place where we learn to be guests and hosts in God's Kingdom. In worship, then, God is our host. As divine host, God through Christ in the Spirit draws us into communion with God and others.

Think for a moment of shopping. Rev. Alan Johnson, a UCC minister here in Denver, wrote a book "Encounters at the Counter." He shares stories of his work at the Harvest Bread Company in Boulder. He learned about hospitality, welcoming the people as they came into the store, to taste or buy bread, to have lunch, or to have a cup of coffee. One of the signatures of the Harvest Bread Company is that anyone can have a slice of the homemade bread at any time. He writes about his experiences and how they relate to the church and its role of welcoming, greeting and hospitality.

Scriptures abound with stories of God's hospitality. One of the more familiar Christian stories is that of the Prodigal Son where the father welcomed home the younger son. The sacrament of communion here in this church is open to all, a sign of welcome and hospitality.

In the coming week, I encourage you to look for ways in which you have been welcomed, made to feel comfortable, and have experienced hospitality. Be attentive also to those where you have not. Be aware of times when you have the opportunity to extend hospitality. What did you do?

We will learn more about the ways of God's hospitality in discussion groups this week. Take time to attend one, share yourself, allow yourself to be welcomed, or to welcome others.

The faith we share is that of the gospel of good news – as seen and experienced in the life, teachings, love and sacrifice of Jesus, who always pointed to his Creator, God the Great Welcomer. May we be the same. Amen.