

Widening Our Welcome

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Columbus, OH
November 12, 2023

Carl Sandburg was once asked, “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” After much thought he said, “Exclusive.”

Ancient Witness: Galatians 3:23-29

Today I start with a simple verse from one of Paul’s letters. And if everyone wants to memorize parts of the Bible, this is a good one to start with: “For there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female...” and we can add in our own generation, “there is neither black nor white, there is neither gay nor straight, there is neither cis nor trans, there is neither liberal nor literalist, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the United Church of Christ we use the term “extravagant welcome” to describe the kind of inclusion the church is called to exhibit that is both surprising and challenging. And the phrase, “widening our welcome” (how many of you have heard of that?) has been used to describe how we are called to keep drawing the circle larger and larger, welcoming those who have been excluded, forgotten and shut out of the church. The work for full inclusion and full equality for women, for racial minorities and for GLBT persons is by no means done! But widening our welcome recognizes that there are other groups—such as those with physical or mental disabilities—for whom we need to make room. People with criminal history, people with mental illnesses, people who struggle with addictions, people who live in poverty—there are many groups of people who are stigmatized, marked by our society as “less than,” and relegated to the margins of life. And we in the church recognize that often we are too much conformed to the ways of the world and allow the invisible barriers to go unchallenged. And so each generation has its own challenge to continually widen the welcome of the church. What is ours?

Years ago I was out with many others canvassing neighborhoods in Cincinnati for the “Vote Yes! For Fairness” campaign. About 20 years ago, (2004) we finally repealed Article 12, which said that gay and transgender persons couldn’t be included among those protected by anti-discrimination laws. (By the way, saying that gay and transgender persons don’t need extra protection is like saying that homophobia and transphobia don’t exist, that there is no discrimination. It’s simply a denial of reality.) And so we were campaigning for the citizens to vote to take the positive step of including gay and trans persons into the city’s anti-discrimination law.

Part of our script was this:

Did you realize that right now it is perfectly legal in Cincinnati to fire someone from their job because they are gay? We think that's wrong. We think everyone, whether they are male or female, black or white, gay or not gay should have the right to work, find housing and be treated fairly.

And so off we went with our clipboards that reminded of Edwin Markum's poem:

*He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

That's what we were doing, trying to draw a circle to include people, a circle of love and fairness, in a world that tries to put people into boxes, and that punishes those who dare to move outside that box.

I have to tell you that a lot of people didn't answer their door. And some folks didn't want to talk to this stranger walking around. But not one person to whom I spoke responded unfavorably. Each one seemed to have a sense that discrimination and exclusion of anyone are wrong. When it came to the status quo, each one was "maladjusted," to use Martin Luther King's word. He once said:

There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence

And so I'm somebody who approaches this with a privileged status: white, male, straight—the trifecta of privilege. Owning unearned "white privilege" refers to the unearned, unjustified advantages not automatically afforded to people of color in this country and generally taken for granted by those of us who are classified as "white."

Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley College, who popularized the term with her 1988 groundbreaking paper, called white privilege the "invisible knapsack" because most whites are unaware of it and may even deny its existence. It's so much easier to define racism as individual acts of prejudice than to acknowledge the invisible systems that confer dominance on one group at the expense of another.

And so that's me. I have had that invisible knapsack and enjoy the invisible privileges of being not just white, but male and straight. But I'm also maladjusted. I love fairness and detest exclusion. Am I there yet? No, and I wish I were much more maladjusted than I am, but one step at a time.

But there is one area of exclusion with which I *can* identify: BELIEF.

I've discovered that as a Christian and as a Minister, if you have progressive views often you had better hide them. You will be labeled a non-Christian, a heretic. You will get your report card and it will say, "does not play well with others." If you dare challenge the selective literalism of our church and culture, you will pay.

And in a way, all these things are related to exclusion based on belief. If you are gay, lesbian or transgender, you are included as long as you believe crazy things. If you believe that you are inferior, that your sexual orientation is inherently evil, that you should never have a meaningful sexual relationship and live a lonely life, then the church and our society will be happy to include you. But if you dare to believe otherwise about yourself and about God's will, you will pay.

And if you were African American exclusion and discrimination wasn't a problem for you if you believed crazy things, if you believed that you are inferior, if you "know your place." But the minute you change your belief and hold that you are a full human being, that you are equal, that you deserve the same opportunities and treatment as others, then you will pay. It's about belief.

It was the same for women. If you believed that you shouldn't vote, if you accepted your subservient role, if you submitted to your husband and the male society, exclusion wasn't a problem. The problem came when you came to believe something else about yourself and dared to act out of that belief.

And so this is where my life intersects with others'. In those great words of Rosa Parks,

I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.

Inclusion is ultimately this. It is living out one's truth and honoring others to do the same. Ultimately it's about what you believe about yourself and about truth and the freedom to act upon it.

I believe that one of the next great challenges for the U.C.C. as we widen our welcome is the equal and full inclusion of those often labeled as *theological liberals*—those non-traditional, non-orthodox, non-creedal believers. They are those followers of Jesus who are inspired by his life and teachings, who understand statements about Jesus such as the virgin birth and bodily resurrection metaphorically, not metaphysically, who distinguish between religious truth and literal fact.

Is there a place for these folks, many of whom have left the church, who feel they are not welcome? Is there a place for them at the table of Jesus? Perhaps no denomination is better positioned to take the lead than the U.C.C. Too often in the history of the church these folks have had to exist in silence, in the closet. Too often they have been

intimidated and run out of the church. Too often they have been second-class parts of the body of Christ.

For me, a progressive church is where these folks are *truly* welcome. It is where there is no theological hierarchy, where non-traditional and traditional, creedal and non-creedal Christians are equal!

Now you may say, “Steve, the U.C.C. is a non-creedal church isn’t it? Aren’t theological liberals—non-creedal Christians—already welcome?” In a word, “No.” It is true that in the U.C.C. we have said we don’t believe in “tests” of faith but in “testimonies” of faith. That is, we believe in everyone’s freedom to uniquely express their own faith. But there is often the informal, unspoken creed—the set of propositions to which one is expected to subscribe.

In the 1920’s there was a group who had a list of five essential things that each Christian needed to believe in order to be considered a Christian:

1. inerrancy of scripture
2. virgin birth of Jesus
3. Christ saves by being a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice
4. physical resurrection
5. Christ performed miracles that superseded the laws of physics

They referred to these points as the “fundamentals,” and this is where the term “fundamentalist” originated. Those who dared to question any one of these points were driven from the churches.

Like sexism, racism and heterosexism that persist in the church and culture today, there continues to be a level of theological exclusion even in the church today.

Many of the “Nones,” those who are not affiliated with any religious tradition, are in this category. They feel they cannot be spiritually honest; they cannot come out about their beliefs and doubts. Many of them feel that they are not truly welcome in the church.

One of the real tests of full equality is whether someone can be a minister or not. And so, let’s say you’re divorced and wondering if you’d be welcomed as a full and equal member of a church. Simply ask, “Would they welcome a minister who is divorced?” There was a time when they weren’t. Same thing with the other groups historically excluded—women, African Americans and racial minorities, and gay persons who are open and out of the closet. A church who will call any of these to be a pastor would be truly welcoming. (At this time we have about 1,500 Open and Affirming congregations in the U.C.C. And my hope is that each one of these would be truly open to having a gay or lesbian pastor, for that would be the test of whether they were really Open and Affirming or not.)

But if we use this test, we can see that as a denomination we have a long way to go when it comes to non-traditional, non-creedal, theological liberals in the church. Many

congregations would say, “Sure, these kinds of Christians are welcome here—just not as a minister or pastor.” I put myself in this category, and I probably would not be truly welcome in 98% of churches.

Look, here is what I see: There are many in this theologically liberal group who are ministers out there, trust me. But most of them are in the closet to one degree or another. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from my gay brothers and lesbian sisters, it’s how corrosive the closet can be—for everyone.

(In the U.C.C. it might be true that there are more churches willing to call a gay or lesbian pastor than a non-traditional, non-creedal, theological liberal who is fully out.)

I’m not saying, by the way, that theological liberals cannot also be exclusive, just as women, racial minorities and GLBT folks can be exclusive. But by and large, they have been the unwelcomed groups, threatened with exclusion and pressure to be silent. Historically, the privileged group in the church has been White, Male, Straight ... and Creedal. (And so welcoming theological liberals as full and equal members does not make a congregation exclusively liberal any more than fully welcoming gay and lesbian persons make a congregation exclusively gay.)

So I envision a church whose membership is not based on what we say we believe, but on *doing*—on our willingness to engage in spiritual practices—on following the spiritual path of Jesus.

I remember when I was invited to travel to Baltimore and preach at a large Presbyterian church there. Afterward an African American gentleman approached me, and he was upset that I had used the language of the civil rights movement about full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons—the language of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. “It’s not the same,” he said. I said, “Your right, it’s not the same. But it also is the same.”

And I went on to point out that much of the language of the civil rights was also borrowed language, borrowed from the ancient Hebrew people who struggled under the yoke of oppression. One of the songs: “Go Down Moses. Way down to Egypt land. Tell ol’ Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go!’”

Language of liberation, equality and justice is always borrowed language. Nobody owns it. We are invited to use it but then graciously turn it over for others to borrow, too.

Justice, it has been said, is a seamless garment. Nobody owns it. It continues to roll down like a mighty stream. It does not stop with any movement.

For God still hath more light to break forth from Her word. God has more people, yet, to welcome fully and equally to this table. And so do we.