

**Message April 17 2016 – A Deeper Vision of Hospitality and Welcome  
Second Sunday of Faith UMC Capital Campaign for Accessibility Project  
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I love to be invited to the home of a good friend for a meal – don't you?!  
First of all – I love it when we take the time to be together – not that we necessarily have the time – but we take the time anyway to be together.

I have one friend – her name is Kim - who makes the most awesome salsa and appetizer spread.

Not only is the food delicious, but so is the drink – and it always goes perfectly with what she is serving.

And not only is the food and drink over the top, but they are all served in the most creative and unique of dishes.

And not only is everything over the top delicious, with food and drink perfectly paired and beautifully presented, but her house has been cleaned, candles are lit before I arrive, flowers are out AND she has set out a book or two that I might be interested in taking home to read.

AND when we sit to eat and drink together, I have her full attention. “How are you, Karen?” And so the evening begins.

And by the time I go home I am healed of whatever ailed my soul – or I've just forgotten about it – I've laughed a great deal – we have both had opportunity to share what we need to share together and I go home feeling refreshed because all my senses and my soul have been engaged and nourished.

Kim has readied the surroundings so that there is nothing to keep us from visiting fully with each other. I have been welcomed so beautifully, no matter what I bring or don't bring to the table.

Hospitality at its finest. Hospitality cloaked in love.

Biblically speaking, hospitality encompasses the “heart art” of welcoming strangers, as well as friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming. And each time we gather together, we claim the joy of homecoming.

We **are** a community whose hearts and actions are guided by the life of Jesus. And Jesus practiced and lived true hospitality all along the way. He did that by ensuring that everyone knew that no one would be barred from total participation when the faithful gather.

Paul heard this too. In Romans 12:13 he says: *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

A woman, previously unknown to me, came into the office last week on a day when I was here alone. She came by because she wanted to bring us a monetary gift for our accessibility project. She is from this community and heard about what we are doing. And then she shared that her vision for our church was that all the people who utilize walkers and wheelchairs will fill our pews when we are done with this project. And she was sure that God wants us to be blessed over and over in that way.

A woman – not from this church – having visions about how we can bless this community, because there is already a proven need for everyone to be able to participate fully! She got it!

Her blessing of our decision to do something huge in order to be more inclusive is very Biblical. Let's look at that for a minute by first engaging in a bit of a Greek lesson.

The Greek word *xenos* means "stranger", but it also means "guest" and "host". And from *xenos* comes the New Testament word for hospitality: *philoxenia* means a love of the guest/stranger or enjoyment of hosting guests. Like my friend I told you about. Unfortunately the form of this word that is used mostly in today's culture is xenophobia – which means the fear of strangers or the fear of foreigners.

But let's look more closely at the interplay between the roles of guest and host in the way Jesus lived his life. Because you will see that when he shares meals with others, guests become hosts and hosts become guests – Jesus' sense of hospitality moves us into a deeper understanding of our role here in this community – and hopefully even every day of our lives.

At the wedding feast of Cana as recorded in John 2 – what happens? Jesus comes to the wedding as a guest, but roles switch as he provides an over abundance of the best wine. Jesus has been invited to bless the meal with what he brings to the table.

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 – the disciples wanted to send the people away because it was too great a task to feed them – Jesus said NO – there's no need to turn them away – we WILL feed them – we will take care of their needs.

And let's look at the story of Jesus and Zaccheus in Luke 19. Jesus insisted on being the guest to Zaccheus - a person everyone labeled as a sinner – and their attitude was that he was not worthy of being a host to Jesus. We know though that Jesus offering of hospitality to Zaccheus by being his guest changed Zaccheus life. You see the way guest and host move back and forth between people who accept each other as they are when spending time together? Meeting the needs of each other.

And then there's the story of the Samaritan woman at the well – I am always so sad that we don't know her name....such a beautiful strong soul she is.

Let me read you this story – and while I do, think about the spirit of hospitality present in this story – and about the roles of guest and host and who offers what to who at different times. And in the passage you will also hear homage given to the saints who have gone before us. A very important part of our work together to always be on the lookout for which new adventure God is leading us. (John 4:4-30)

John 4:4-30 (Common English Bible)

<sup>4</sup> Jesus had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup> A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." <sup>8</sup> His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.)

<sup>10</sup> Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water?" <sup>12</sup> You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

<sup>13</sup> Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life."

<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!”

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, get your husband, and come back here.”

<sup>17</sup> The woman replied, “I don’t have a husband.”

“You are right to say, ‘I don’t have a husband,’” Jesus answered.<sup>18</sup> “You’ve had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn’t your husband. You’ve spoken the truth.”

<sup>19</sup> The woman said, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem.”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You and your people worship what you don’t know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth.”

<sup>25</sup> The woman said, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us.”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, “I Am—the one who speaks with you.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Just then, Jesus’ disciples arrived and were shocked that he was talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” <sup>28</sup> The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup> “Come and see a man who has told me everything I’ve done! Could this man be the Christ?”<sup>30</sup> They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus.

There is no judgment on Jesus’ part – only a welcoming of this woman by paving the way of understanding for her..

Jesus invited everyone into the fold and did whatever he needed to do to remove the barriers from inclusion.

In our life together, we are all hosts and we are all guests. We are all saints and we are all sinners. There is holiness to be found in each of us. And so the way for total inclusion needs to be paved for each person who is here and who might yet come. One of the things we learn from Jesus is that it’s not about us.

We don’t take on either big or small challenges because it suits us, but because it is needed by someone in the community.

Are you familiar with the history of Martha’s Vineyard? Before Martha’s Vineyard became an affluent summer community, the island had another distinction. For nearly three hundred years the island community of fishermen and farmers, isolated from the New England mainland, had a very high rate of profound hereditary deafness—one in 155 compared to the US average of 1 in 5728—due to a recessive gene.

The astonishing thing is that nearly everyone on the island was bi-lingual, speaking both English and a homegrown sign language. Those with hearing used sign language not simply to converse with those who were deaf but also to converse quietly, to speak across long distances instead of yelling and even for general conversation. Medical anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce, now a professor at Yale University, ends her book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* by writing, "The most striking fact about these deaf men and women is that they were not handicapped because no one perceived their deafness as a handicap. As one woman said to me, 'You know, we didn't think anything special about them. They were just like anyone else. When you think about it, the Island was an awfully nice place to live.' Indeed it was."

Handicaps are that only relative to another standard. A handicap is a negative difference and a seemingly added expense only when the larger society perceives it as such and doesn’t create an environment in which people can interact as equals.

In our world today, where people are living longer, we as Christians are called to pave the way to inclusion in graceful and loving ways. It's not really an option to make the changes we need to make for everyone to be able to access our building – most of all that place where we sit at table to eat together. No one should be excluded from such a sacred time together.

Do you recall the post-resurrection story of Jesus with some of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. They recognized him ONLY when he broke bread with them. We see and know each other more fully when we share table together.

One more story.

Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer, was going to a monastery for a retreat. The monks in that monaestery observed vows of silence and the retreat was to be meditative and prayerful. Nouwen was delayed and was late getting to the Monastery on a very miserable, rainy night. Upon his arrival, he rang the bell and was met at the door by one of the brothers. He warmly greeted Henri, took his wet coat, took him to the kitchen and made him a cup of tea. They chatted into the late night hours and Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat. He knew this monk was supposed to observe silence, so he finally asked him, "Why are you willing to sit and talk with me?" The monk replied, "Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of my order, none is higher than hospitality."

And from what I hear about what Harry said last week – any act of hospitality – and maybe even those that require sacrifice – any act of loving one another – doing what we need to do to help a guest to also be a host - will change your life. Forever.

Amen.