

UCC Core Values: Extravagant Welcome  
Isaiah 55:1-2, Hebrews 13:1-2, Luke 18:15-17

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When folks ask me what I do for a living I tell them I'm the pastor of Edgewood United Church. One of the follow-up questions they always ask is, "What kind of church is Edgewood?" I tell them we are a part of the United Church of Christ, and 9 times out of 10 I get a blank stare. The United Church of Christ is one of the most popular protestant denominations in the United States, coming just behind Seventh Day Adventists, but we have a bit of a name recognition problem.

When the churches that make up the United Church of Christ joined together 61 years ago, they all had their own unique names – named after Saints, named after neighborhoods or towns, named First or Second or Third, depending on what order they were founded in their area. Our own church, Edgewood, might be one of the only churches named after its original telephone exchange.

When we all joined the UCC, some of us added United Church of Christ onto the end of the name, like we did – Edgewood United Church, United Church of Christ, but others didn't. Some of them had names like Second Congregational Church of Grand Rapids, but then there were other Congregational Churches, like First Congregational Church of Bancroft, that didn't join the UCC so you can't make many assumptions based on a name.

And then there is the confusion when I say, "United Church of Christ," and someone replies, "THE Church of Christ?" I explain, "No, no! Not THE Church of Christ, the UNITED Church of Christ." Unlike other denominations like Methodist, Lutheran, or Episcopal, the name of a church won't necessarily identify itself with the United Church of Christ or give someone

new an idea of who we are and what we believe.

A decade ago the UCC recognized we had an identity problem and started an advertising campaign to make a better name for ourselves. The focus of that campaign was two commercials that played on tv stations across the country. The first was known as “the ejector ad.” It showed a worship service happening in a church sanctuary. A woman of color comforted a crying baby, and she was ejected from her seat and out of the sanctuary. Next it pans to two men, one with his arm around the shoulders of the other, and zoom, ejected out of the sanctuary. An older person and their walker, ejected. On and on, folks went flying out of their seats high up toward heaven. The tagline says, “God doesn't reject people. Neither do we.”

The second commercial didn't even make it inside of a church. Outside of a church building there are lines of people waiting to get inside. Two bouncers are making decisions about who to let through and who to send away. The white preppy man and wife with two teenage children make it inside, the man in a wheelchair and the Latina don't. This time the tagline says, “Jesus didn't turn away people. Neither do we.” Both commercials then show a large group of people – different ages, abilities, family formations, races, and sexualities – and our name: the United Church of Christ. Both commercials communicated one of the core values of the UCC: an extravagant welcome.

An extravagant welcome is different than a regular welcome. A regular welcome is what we give to our neighbor as they walk their dog past our house – we wave hello, say hi, and each go about our business. You are friendly or kind, but neither of you leaves the encounter transformed in any way. A few days later you might even forget that you even saw your neighbor.

I would argue that being welcoming is the baseline of how we should treat each other – our neighbors and coworkers, people we see in a store or waiting on us in a restaurant, folks we stand in line beside, fellow students who sit next to us in class or stand in front of us in a

classroom. Being welcoming just let's people know you are not a jerk, and that they can continue to exist near you or interact with you in a comfortable manner. There are plenty of times when each of us fails to be welcoming, and plenty of people we can think of who were unwelcoming to us, but we know that to be welcoming to someone new is to be a decent human being.

An extravagant welcome takes that baseline welcome and amplifies it – on a welcome scale of one to ten, an extravagant welcome is an eleven. When you experience an extravagant welcome, you walk away from the experience feeling profoundly cared for, seen, and changed by the love you encountered. When you offer someone an extravagant welcome, you feel warm and fuzzy all over, inspired to do it again, and feeling like you made a genuine, lasting connection with someone. An extravagant welcome is one that transforms the welcomer and the one being welcomed. It can happen as people interact together, but it can also happen before people meet. A building can be adapted into a space that feels extravagantly welcoming by the signs, design, and care that went into it.

An extravagant welcome takes a profound amount of work – it is an aspirational attitude. An extravagant welcome means setting aside your needs or desires and caring to the needs of someone else. It is the ability and willingness to look at who is most in need and orient yourself there – even if that removes yourself from the center.

Drinking fountains are one of my favorite examples of this. As a tall person, I always do a double take when I encounter a short drinking fountain meant for children. It's an inconvenience for me to have to bend farther down to reach it, but it makes me smile because it reminds me I'm somewhere that places the needs of children first, who wouldn't be able to reach a taller fountain on their own. I'm not the example of the extravagant welcome – I'm the example of the baseline welcoming person that doesn't grumble at the inconvenience – the extravagant welcome was whoever thought to create a space that is accessible for our youngest and smallest people. They

reimagined something many of us take for granted and thought of a way to include more people.

Extravagant welcome takes forethought – it means looking to see who is being kept out and then asking or researching what it would take to bring them in and make them feel overwhelmingly welcome and cared for. The UCC made this a core value because we recognized that this often does not happen in churches. The commercials weren't exaggerating. There are many, many groups of people that have felt unwelcome in churches.

LGBTQ folks being explicitly told their lives and their love is incompatible with Christian life. People of color feeling invisible in predominantly white churches. People living in poverty made to feel unwelcome if they cannot financially contribute to a church. Parents with young children being told to silence their children or leave worship. Older folks feeling like their needs and traditions are irrelevant in a changing church, and young folks wondering if there is room for their new ideas and energy. Folks with mobility challenges, in some cases, physically not able to get inside a church building. For being a religion where all are welcome, there are too many stories of people being left out and kicked out of church.

By adopting an extravagant welcome, the UCC is both sending a message that we are a different kind of church to folks on the outside, but it is also a reminder for us folks on the inside that we have more work to do. How might we draw the circle wider? How might we turn our hearty welcome into extravagance for a group or individual wondering if there is room for them here?

The UCC did not create this concept on our own. It is woven throughout scripture, as we see in our readings from today. Indeed, from the very first creation story in Genesis – we see God as creator bringing forth a world where each element is named and valued, where the land and sky and waters work together to create a complex ecosystem where all of creation might thrive together. For the rest of the stories of Scripture, God reminds humanity that they are loved and

cared for – and implores them to show the same love and care for each other. Our faith story is one of God welcoming, healing, and loving, no matter how unworthy someone feels, no matter how they have been outcast, no matter how alone and unloved they feel. God makes a way in, builds community, and calls on us to do the same.

An Extravagant Welcome is one of the UCC core values that we here at Edgewood have taken to heart. I could name a dozen examples of things we have done to our building, our language, and our outreach to go above and beyond making sure someone knows they are welcome here. I have heard stories from many of you about people who have reached out in unprecedented ways, made you feel at home when you were new, and transformed your life because of the relationship they have offered.

We aspire to be an over the top, extravagant people. I say aspire because an extravagant welcome is not a box you check and complete – the boundaries between regular and extravagance shift as our culture shifts, as we become more aware of who is still on the outside, and as we grow in our commitment to offer a deeper, more welcoming church. This is a value of ours because it strive to live into it every day, sometimes failing as all people and institutions do, and always committing to growing and doing better the next time.

As we reflect on the extravagant welcome we have received or offered in this church or in other places, I want to invite us to wonder where we might have an opportunity to turn a regular welcome into an extravagant one. We've asked these questions before and will keep asking, but who are we missing here today? Who is here but struggles to move in to the center from the edges? Where are we called to amplify our welcome in the coming months and years? We prayerfully ask these questions and say together, Amen.