

“Welcoming the Welcome”
Hebrews 13:1-3, 6-8, 15-16 NRSV

Pastor Liz Miller
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After worship today there is a group of folks that is gathering to talk about a book they read together, written by our new Conference Minister. A Conference Minister is the person who is the head pastor for all the United Church of Christ congregations in Michigan. She is like our bishop, without a fancy hat and she answers to us instead of us answering to her. Our new Conference Minister is The Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel and the book is *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To: Spirituality without Stereotypes, Religion without Ranting*. Her book wrestles with the predicament many people who happen to be progressive and happen to belong to a church or claim Christianity as their own often find themselves in: how do we explain why we choose to belong to the same religious tradition as so many people whom we might disagree with or have caused others harm or have even caused ourselves harm?

Rev. Dr. Daniel has two answers to that: First, we have to stop pointing our fingers at everyone else and look at ourselves first. If you stick around any community long enough - even a progressive Christian church - you will find that there are ways people have been wounded, scars that can be pointed to that come from hurt feelings, conflict, or feeling like an outsiders in a group of tight knit insiders. We haven't solved Christianity. We aren't the only group in the world that has figured out how to live together in perfect harmony. Belonging to a community, religious or otherwise, is, on one hand, to open yourself up to being disappointed, and on the other hand, is to open yourself up to building a life with people who will still find a way forward with you when it your turn to be the disappointment. There is no church, no religious tradition, no community that is made up of flawed humans that does have its own flaws. As your pastor I

will be the first to admit there are times I have not been the pastor someone needed, have let someone down, or made the wrong decision. Why do you think I mention grace and forgiveness so much? I'm aware of how much of it I need.

Rev. Dr. Daniel writes, "One of the most rigorous parts of a journey of faith is finding a religious community in the first place. It is hard to find that community that resonates; where a person can sense that they could feel at home, but not too much at home. A good religious community is like that: both comforting and discomfiting. God loves us exactly as we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay that way. That's how religious community should feel, but it won't because that perfect balance is God's alone. We human beings just take a shot at it." (131)

Once we acknowledge that our church has as many flaws at the next - it's just that we've found the flaws that go well with our own - we have to move away from defending what our church *isn't* or *doesn't* believe, and practice talking about what we do believe, or why we do find meaning in the Christian story, or how we feel called to show up in a community that is messy and complicated because we are messy and complicated too. If we're so certain we're not like those guys over there, what are we like? What do we believe? How do we do church together, in the joys and hardships of life?

Our scripture passage today seeks to answer these same questions to another, much earlier Christian community. This is a Letter written the Hebrews from St. Paul, their leader. This was a public letter, meant to be shared with their congregation. This letter is as if we peaked into an early church's newsletter or read snippets from a very long sermon from their 1st Century pastor. Paul is writing to them with guidance on how they are called to be a church together - what they should stand up for or speak out against, how they should practice their faith.

The Letter to the Hebrews was not included in the Bible because it was meant to be the end-all-be-all of instructions on how to be church forever and ever, but rather, it was included because in the exhortations to its own community, there is much wisdom for other church communities to find. Like any church back then or today, we can read the entirety of the Letter to the Hebrews and not agree with everything that it proclaims, but still find many parts of their beliefs that align with ours. It is a letter that helps us articulate who we are today and who we are called to be.

The verses we read are from the letter's conclusion. This conclusion lifts up themes that we still very much emphasize today: the importance of worship and praise of God, proclaiming your beliefs, and holding fast to or persevering for the sake of those beliefs. What strikes me most about the conclusion is that as it goes through the different beliefs of this early church, is that much of it still reflects ministries that are at the heart of our ministry together.

Our conclusion in Hebrews first reminds us to “not neglect to show hospitality for strangers” for we might be “entertaining angels unawares.” Often it seems that our congregation can be split into two sides. The first side is a group of people who find themselves asking, “Do I fit in here? Is this the right church for me? Do I feel welcome to come as I am?” The other side is a group of people that is asking, “How can we welcome people into this church? How can we show hospitality?” Sometimes people find themselves on both sides of the conversation, switching as they move into different parts of the community, try on different roles, or leave for a season of life and return at a later time feeling both old and new at the same time.

This question of hospitality undergirds every conversation we have together: from the first words of our worship when we remind each other that no matter who you are or where you

are on life's journey, you are welcome here to the ways we greet each other, asking questions that draw each other out, that nurture new relationships, and seek to find connections together.

This past week one of our leadership teams, the Program Board, the team that is responsible for cultivating and caring for the ministries of the church, reflected on the past year in anticipation of the start of a new program year in September. Almost all of our memories of joyful experiences or hope-filled ministries were grounded in the hospitality that was offered - meals shared together, space that was created where people could fully be themselves - and where that hospitality resulted in invitations that deepened relationships through things like Bible studies and neighborhood groups. The Program Board affirmed a goal to continue to focus on hospitality, from the way they invite people to different events and make it known, yes, this invitation really is for you, to the way they use food to communicate our values and make people feel welcome, such as the Kick Off Celebration's plant-based food menu that is not only delicious but communicates our care for all of creation.

Practicing hospitality is like planting seeds in a garden. You don't know which ones will take root, which ones will flower, but you plant them, water them, and tend to them knowing that it wouldn't happen without our intentional care. As Rev. Daniels writes, hospitality is our way of saying, "Come join us in this God thing. It's better if we do it together, but it won't be easier. We're all too different to make it easy. We're a mixed bag. But come join this mixed bag of nuts. We don't have any cashews yet, and the mix could be better because of you."

The Letter to the Hebrews goes on to remind us to "remember those who are in prison...[and] those who are being tortured." This verse is almost two thousand years old but it could have been written by our own Peace and Justice Ministry Team and Racial Justice Ministry Team who, among other important things, works tirelessly to advocate reform for

prison system, to support inmates when they are released on parole, and reminds us all of the layers of iniquity, including racial inequity, imbedded into our justice system. Our church shares this value with the early Hebrews – knowing that until there is justice for all there can be peace for none, and knowing that whenever someone suffers, we all suffer. In answer to the question, “What does your church believe?” Many folks from Edgewood will start by saying, “We believe in a peace that comes from God, and we believe in working for justice for all of God’s children.”

Speaking of God...Hebrews continues in its conclusion to remind its people to offer praise to God, knowing that worship wraps around and shapes all that they do together, just as we come together each week in worship knowing that it is only by coming together we might be sent out to live in discipleship and transform our worship in the pews into a worship of action in the world. In our church, we praise God not because we assume we all conform to the same precise beliefs or understanding of our faith, but because we celebrate the diversity that God created, including how we think, find meaning, and connect with scripture. It is a shared faith that invites us to bring our brains into worship, our hearts into service, and our whole bodies into our practice of loving God, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves.

We are a people and a church that is always growing and changing, understanding that God is our constant, that Jesus Christ’ ministry and call to radical love is the same yesterday as it is today, that the Holy Spirit weaves together the saints of yesterday with the generations of tomorrow. God is bigger than we can ever understand. And whether it’s by reading the letter to the Hebrews or other early churches, or reading modern day testimonies from churches and leaders like Rev. Dr. Daniel that are trying to live out their faith in a community that is as complicated as they are, we search for evidence of God’s love and grace around us.

As Rev. Dr. Daniel writes, “For some people, the faith journey is tourism, a place you stop by temporarily. You know what its like to be a tourist. You fly in knowing that pretty soon you can fly out. You observe the new country, you take pictures, but you don’t get deeply involved in the people’s lives there...But there’s another way to take a journey that is very different from tourism. And that is the journey that is an adventure...When you’re on an adventure, you have to relinquish your expectations. Expectations are the enemy of adventure. If faith is an adventure journey, you need to accept that you may not know how this trip is going to turn out. You visit a country that might be strange to you, and off the beaten path. You cannot control the itinerary. You may be less concerned with having canned, prepackaged experiences, and more interested in being stretched to learn new things. You may, on an adventure, actually join a church and try to meet other people, some of whom will disagree with you, or even annoy you. That’s an adventure.

The early followers of Jesus might have started out as tourists, pretty sure of what they’d see and hear, learn and do, with him as their guide. But they discovered that faith in him was a nonstop adventure. There was no playbook for church, no set of doctrine that everyone had to believe. No itinerary. Jesus was a man to them, and when he died, they had the biggest shock of their lives. Death did not swallow him up, but he was raised from the dead. Talk about a whole new travel itinerary. Before that, they thought they knew where the journey of life ended—and that would be death. But in the resurrection, they realized that death might be the beginning of the very biggest adventure of their lives.” (176-77) May it be so.