

## **“Extravagant, Exuberant, without Exception”**

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**Texts: Luke 14 and Philemon**

For weeks, I have been urging members of Pilgrim to offer their friends, their neighbors, their colleagues and co-workers to try out Pilgrim this fall. If you are among those invited, let me offer you this word of Welcome. If you were among those offering invitations, let me say, “Thank you.” And if you offered invitations that were not accepted, I hope you listened carefully to the Gospel reading. The host of the banquet sent his servants out several times to invite people in until his banquet hall was filled. Keep offering invitations.

This morning I want to tell you a little about why we need to keep inviting folks in. There is really only one reason. It’s not because we have the best classical musicians in town—though I might think that. It’s not because we have a Jaeckel organ and beautiful sanctuary—though I love being in this space. It’s not because we are committed to social justice causes, though we are. And it’s not because we have an intergenerational community where we offer support and encouragement for each stage of life’s journey—though I think we do that amazingly well.

There is only one reason to invite other people to share in our congregational life—for an hour, for a day, for a season or for a lifetime. There is only one reason. On Thursday, the team from Oneida, hung the banner on the front of our building. “We are a people of extravagant welcome.”

At first glance, that sounds like we’re making a claim about our own character. We’re making a promise to anyone who walks into our building, “whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I hope we can live up to that promise.

But even that is not the reason for inviting people to share our journey of faith. The reason we offer an invitation; the reason we promise to welcome strangers and friends alike; the reason we promise extravagant welcome is that we, ourselves, have been the recipients of God’s extravagant welcome.

The stories we read in the Bible, the word that is proclaimed from this pulpit, the faith that we practice in this community is rooted in the conviction and the experience of God’s welcoming each of us into a community of believers.

My Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggeman, was fond of saying that there are several different salvation stories in the Bible. They are all related. They all convey much of the same truth. But they use different images and reflect varying experiences.

The story of salvation most familiar to many Americans is the story of sin and atonement. We are alienated from God because we are not the people God created us to be. Through Jesus, God offers us forgiveness and reconciles us to Godself. The central image of this story is the cross.

There's another story of salvation more familiar in Latin America and some places in Africa. We are not able to be the people we were created to be because of life circumstances. Others rule over us, abuse us, and refuse to respect our dignity. God strengthens us to live in such circumstances and delivers us from oppression. The central image of this salvation story is the exodus from Egypt.

The third salvation story is based on the exile in Babylon. We have lost our way and no longer live in our homeland. We are strangers living in a strange land. And salvation is the story of God bringing us home.

Those stories are all salvation stories. They are inter-related and interwoven. None of them stands alone. All three of them end in the same place: God extravagantly, exuberantly, and without exception welcomes us.

Think for a moment about the stories Jesus told. He often portrayed the kingdom of God as a banquet, a feast, a table filled with good things, to which we are invited. Think of the stories from his ministry—when he broke bread in the wilderness place, he feed thousands, and there were leftovers besides. Think of the stories of forgiveness and healing. Extravagant grace for the undeserving, the marginalized, the outcast. So extravagant, so excessive that those who believed in living by the rules felt threatened.

Next Sunday we'll read two well known parables from Jesus' teaching. In one, a woman looks night and day for a coin she had lost. In the other, a shepherd leaves his flock to go in search of a lost lamb. When each of them finds what was lost, they throw a party! They invite the neighbors in. They are exuberant in their delight and joy. Sometimes, we take God so seriously, we forget that God welcomes us with laughter and joy and a hearty embrace.

God welcomes us without exception. We human beings are so often prone to put conditions on acceptance. We are willing to forgive, but only if the one who offended us is remorseful. We are willing to be charitable, but we sometimes make distinctions about who deserves our compassion. A hundred times a day we make subconscious decisions about who we pay attention to and whom we will ignore. The cashier at the grocery store. The young man bagging our groceries. The We all have our internal filters well trained—it's part of how we get through the day.

In this community of faith, we remind each other every week, I hope, that we are people who believe in a God who extravagantly, exuberantly, and without exception welcomes each of us.

And because we have been welcomed this way, I hope we are a community that easily welcomes friends and neighbors, strangers and each other. About two weeks ago our church council members spent time talking about what this phrase could mean. We each recalled times in our lives when we felt extravagantly welcomed. And we recalled times when we did not feel welcomed at all. We tried to identify the difference. Again and again, the stories we told

reflected on the difference it made when we were noticed, when we were treated as individuals, when someone made eye contact with us, or smiled, or remembered our name. We told stories about what a difference it made when someone drew us into a conversation and listened to what we had to say. Welcoming had something to do with attentiveness and paying attention.

The epistle reading this morning is from the book of Philemon. It's one of the shortest books in the Bible—it has a total of 21 verses. It's not a book at all, but a letter Paul wrote to one of the leaders of the church in Colossae. While imprisoned, Paul befriended a slave named Onesimus. They had become such good friends, Onesimus would have stayed to care for Paul, and Paul admits he was much tempted by the idea. But Paul also knew that Onesimus belonged to Philemon. Paul knew that it was only right to send Onesimus home. The words of the letter are truly radical, for Paul says to this wealthy businessman—I'm sending your slave back to you. Welcome him—as if you were welcoming me. Treat him with all the dignity and courtesy and comforts that you would afford me if I were knocking at your door. Remember, this is a slave Paul is returning to a master. Talk about urging Philemon to extend an extravagant welcome!

In a community of faith, the usual relationships, the barriers and boundaries that are a part of life elsewhere, are reconfigured. In welcoming one another extravagantly, the distinctions that often divide us begin to disappear. In another passage of Scripture, Paul talks about the community of faith where we are no longer strangers and foreigners, but members of the same household, like sisters and brothers.

Welcome one another—extravagantly. It's not always easy, especially for those of us are culturally conditioned to be suspicious of anything excessive. Too much of anything makes us nervous.

Welcome one another-exuberantly. Most of us are also culturally conditioned to be reserved in our expressions of emotion, especially in church.

Welcome one another-without exception. Real hospitality is risky business because you never know who might walk in the door.

We are a people of extravagant welcome. We've experienced that welcome. We extend that welcome, both to folks who have been at Pilgrim a long time and those who might be gingerly considering this community of faith. Extravagant, exuberant, without exception.

Amen.