

October 23, 2022
 Luke 7:36-50; Mark 10:13-16; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13

Kathryn Reid Walker
 First Presbyterian, Eau Claire

Next Sunday is **Reformation Sunday**, a day on which we recall the historical roots of the Presbyterian Church. The worship service that day will include a Reformation "Lessons and Carols". If you are willing to be a reader, please let me know. We will also celebrate **All Saints Day**, and take time to remember and honor members of our First Presbyterian family who have died in the past year. We also include family pets who have died as we honor all of God's creatures and recognize their importance in our lives. Please send Becky Poquette a photo to include in the slide show, include members and regular attendees and also spouses, partners, children, and pets of members or attendees. There will be a time to name and remember other loved ones as well. Next Sunday we will also collect a "noisy offering" for CareLink, and we will **dedicate our pledges** of support to the church for the coming year.

Speaking of pledges, Sue Wagner asked if I would say something this morning to encourage you in our stewardship and generosity emphasis. Sue mentioned "per capita" last week. Per capita is a set amount of money (an apportionment) per member that congregations pay to the larger Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is a way that we all share in the costs of running the denomination and its mission and providing connections and resources at all levels of the church. The amount this year is \$33.04 per member. Since each individual church is required to make this payment, it really helps when those who are able contribute their apportionment. Please label your gift "per capita" when you give that portion for 2023.

We are richly blessed in this church with faithful people and many unique resources. Writer Wendell Berry asks "*Do you want an economy of grace based on generosity, or an economy of scarcity based on acquisition and fear?*" Too often our stewardship efforts seem to fall into the pattern of "we need you to give because we have to pay the bills." And it is true, we have to pay the bills and the staff to keep the church functioning healthily. And, yes, we have building and financial challenges. But our giving is not just about that. If you haven't made a pledge yet, I would ask that before you do, you spend time in prayer. If you've already turned in a pledge, please also spend time in prayer – you may or may not change your pledge. Stewardship and giving of time, talent, and money is a response of generosity and an act of discipleship; it is a **spiritual** practice that benefits the giver as well as the receiver.

I told Sue I would tell my mother's story. She was a great believer in tithing – giving the church the first 10% of the family's income. She and my dad practiced this all their adult lives. I remember a drawer with a set of envelopes – one for food, one for the church tithe, and some for other bills. Mom said it wasn't always easy. We were living in a small rural community where ministers were not well-paid. Sometimes she wondered how they would make it to the end of the month, but she always knew things would work out. She was a woman of great faith. Sometimes we would get meat from a local farmer or other good food. Sometimes an extra check would come in the mail from someone. My mom made a lot of our clothes, sometimes out of old curtains. She found ways to stretch the food to stay within her budget. She saved Green Stamps (do some of you remember those?). Stamps were given out when you bought groceries or gas, you collected them and stuck them in little books, then redeemed them for products when you had enough. One year, that is how my parents bought our Christmas presents. No matter what, the tithe was never neglected and Mom always felt we were blessed. She had faith that it was the right thing to do.

I am not saying that everyone should give 10% of their income, but I believe this story is a good example of how giving can be a meaningful act of faithful discipleship. Thank you for the many ways you contribute to the mission and ministry of First Presbyterian.

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 7:36-50

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus^[a] to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine. ³⁷And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹"A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus^[b] said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little." ⁴⁸Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Mark 10:13-16

¹³ People were bringing children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13

13 If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

SERMON: “Challenge Othering”

This is the last in a series of worship services focused on Welcoming All, which have been based on the curriculum being used for Faith Formation this month. Of course, that does not mean we stop welcoming all after this Sunday! We’ve identified hospitality as central to the biblical narrative. We’ve talked about Jesus’ call for an outreach of hospitality to people who don’t look like us, talk like us, act like us, or live like us – calling us to see Christ in every person. We’ve talked a little about the gifts we all bring to the practice of hospitality. Today the particular practice to be highlighted is *challenging othering*, and is likely the most challenging of the themes related to welcoming all.

The term *othering* may be unfamiliar to some. Throughout history humans have been very good at developing language and behaviors that describe certain people or groups of people as *other*. *Othering* is not the same as simply noticing differences, and it is **very far** beyond **celebrating** differences. “In communication studies the word *other* is used as a verb, describing the verbal process of setting up another group of people as different, separate, and inferior. This behavior directly contradicts the practice of hospitality – to see Christ in the other. .” [Follow Me: Welcome All curriculum]

It’s not hard to find examples – European settlers *othered* the indigenous peoples wherever they went; Nazis *othered* Jews, refugees, homosexuals, Roma, people with disabilities, and others; Americans *othered* Japanese during WWII; White Americans have *othered* African Americans for centuries; Protestants have *othered* Roman Catholics and vice versa. Of late, Democrats and Republicans *other* each other without compunction. There seems to be a never-ending list of examples.

In the ancient biblical realm, *othering* was present too. The Israelites *othered* the peoples of neighboring groups. Perhaps that is why the message of hospitality is so frequently given through God’s messengers – the people were commanded to welcome and care for the alien, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the most vulnerable.

We see examples of *othering* in today’s gospel stories. In the first one, Jesus is invited to a Pharisee’s home – one of the leaders of the faith. A woman, seemingly out of the blue, enters and proceeds to wash and anoint Jesus’ feet. We note first that the woman is called a *sinner*. “In a Jewish context, the descriptor “sinner” would indicate someone who was not faithful to [the] law — a transgressor of the Torah.” [Sara Henrich in Working Preacher online]. We don’t know what her transgression was; it could have been that this wasn’t the first time she, as a woman, had dared to enter a place or situation where women were not allowed to be. Whatever the case, the label *sinner* has the effect of *othering* her in addition to her lack of status as a woman. Simon, the Pharisee silently questions the act of this woman and Jesus’ acceptance of her. His thought was not spoken allowed, but I bet you could see his condemnation in his eyes and his stance. Jesus certainly perceived it. He responds with a story and a scolding. “Here,” he says, “is an example of extravagant hospitality . . . unlike what **you** have demonstrated.”

In the second gospel lesson, Jesus calls for the children to be allowed to come to him. “Children had no status in Jesus’

time. . . [His] welcome of them presents one more picture of his abundant love and hospitality for people with no power” . . . people who were *othered*. [Follow Me: Welcome All curriculum]

Jesus had a habit of extending hospitality and compassion to people who were normally *othered* -- people who had little or no status, the sick, the poor, those rejected by society and by cultural and religious norms. As Father Richard Rohr reminds us, “Jesus welcomed the stranger, rejected social discrimination, confronted economic injustice, spoke against institutional power, and repudiated war and violence. . .”

[<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGqRGVKsTGqczrfBJKHRswMmrK>] He challenged the status quo. Jesus welcomed all who came to him. And he taught his disciples, including us, that **this** all-inclusive welcome is the sort of behavior that is the expected norm in the realm of God on earth.

Do you know what *othering* feels like when you are on the receiving end? I imagine many of us have experienced times when we have been made to feel like we don’t belong. Growing up in the little town of Rushmore, MN, my class in school consisted of 18 kids – 9 girls and 9 boys. From my perspective there were two groups of girls, each with four members, that formed and pretty much stayed the same for all the years I was there. I played with girls from both groups, depending on the mood and rivalries of the day, but always got the message that I didn’t really belong to either group. It could have been because I was a PK (preacher’s kid) or because I questioned (at a very young age) why the boys could hang upside down on the monkey bars and we girls couldn’t just because our mom’s made us wear dresses. Or maybe it was because I voiced that I thought re-enacting episodes of Hawaii 5-O during recess was stupid.

I know that there are people in our church who have experienced bullying and *othering* for various reasons – size or weight, physical or cognitive challenges, differences in interests, socioeconomic factors, gender or sexual orientations or questionings. Who are the people in our surrounding community who regularly experience exclusion? People who are not White or of European heritage? People who are homeless? People who are gay, transgender, or who don’t fit into binary categories? What about people who experience the stigma of mental health issues? *Othering* can exclude people from material and societal resources, from full inclusion in religious settings, from experiencing a sense of acceptance and wholeness. *Othering* can limit someone’s capacity to fully realize their “child-of-Godness”.

Jesus’ level of inclusiveness may be scary to some – new creation does not often come easily. But this is a necessary conversation if we are to be all that God calls us to be. We can ask each other questions. We can share our own stories. We can wonder together, “Can the church be a place where people do **not** experience *othering*?” The practice we are being encouraged to engage in is to **un-do and challenge** *othering*. This requires some intentionality and it can require courage as we step out of past ways of believing or doing things. It also requires grace, because we are humans and we don’t always get things right! Implicit biases can seep into our words and actions. The dictionary definition of implicit bias is “a bias that results from the tendency to process information based on unconscious associations and feelings, even when these are contrary to one’s conscious or declared beliefs.” [<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/implicit-bias>] For example, someone may agree that racism is a bad thing, but go across the street to avoid walking by a Black man without really knowing why. A chairwoman with strong leadership skills may be thwarted by committee members without them realizing they are responding that way because of her gender. A church might say they value children, but be unwilling to move objects such as pews to make a more child-friendly space. The effects of implicit bias might lead to the exclusion of people we want to welcome.

Awareness is a part of undoing the *othering* that we may be unintentionally reinforcing. What are other ways to engage in this Christly practice? The “Welcome All” curriculum guide referred to an article published in the Huffington Post in which the author tells of her experience one day on the New York subway. “There was a man mumbling to himself, pacing on the subway. . . He was quite upset that he had ‘paid a lot of money to get out of jail’ and that now ‘he had to commute all the way to Manhattan for court, even though he was from the Bronx.’ And this was all ‘somebody’s fault’ and ‘somebody should pay.’ Then he looked and said ‘I hate Jews,’ staring into the face of the man with sidelocks and a top hat by the door. ‘But I’m not racist, because I hate Jesus too.’” He continued his rant about the awfulness of Jews and what he would do if that man moved onto his block.

“The man with sidelocks stayed silent and didn't move. His gaze did not shift. He didn't look down at his shoes in discomfort. . . Rather he stood, head erect, staring straight ahead, while the man [who was ranting] continued his string of racial slurs and expletives.”

The author considered whether she could stand up to the ranter – confront him and tell him to stop -- tell him he was wrong. But she was a small 5'1" woman. Just then another man, taller and wider than the man who was ranting, left his seat. She thought he was going to do the confrontation thing, but instead “he walked over to the man with sidelocks and shook his hand. He then proceeded to apologize to him, for the man's rant, explaining that at least **he** knew that this Jewish man was not the cause of this man's or the world's problems. He then asked if he could please stand near the man, so that if the ranter would come back, he'd be there to defend him?”

“The man with sidelocks consented, just as the ranting man turned back around to face him. . . Upon seeing this new man standing beside the man with the sidelocks, the man threw down his backpack and challenged the defender to ‘lay a finger on me.’ The defender simply [smiled], told him to calm down, and said he figured he was about to arrive at his desired location. The man looked at him menacingly, and then at the ground. He picked up his backpack, just as the train slammed to a stop and said, ‘I may be leaving, but I'll know if y'all keep talking about me.’ He left.”

The author wondered about the **power** of *standing with* someone who is a scapegoat – someone who is being *othered*. As individuals and as a church body, *standing with* is one way to challenge *othering*. [Melanie Goldberg; <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/building-barriers-to-surm-b-8815590>] As a church there is much we can do. In addition to promoting a sense of awareness, we can respond to our recognized errors with prayers of lament and confession. We can pray for open hearts that will welcome all the people Jesus loves. We can keep an eye on our spoken, written, and visual communication to see if groups of people are being othered. We can be aware of how aspects of our building may exclude some and work on making changes. We must seek to welcome **all** to participate in **all** areas of ministry. [Follow Me: Welcome All curriculum]

Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), is leading the way with awareness campaigns and inclusive statements. “We Choose Welcome” is an effort which expresses our commitment to welcome refugees and immigrants in the United States, many of whom are fleeing terror and tyranny. We challenge the racism and *othering* that many immigrants experience. Last week, I mentioned the Intersectional Priorities of the Matthew 25 Initiative, one of which is Gender Justice and Heteropatriarchy. This means engaging in work that confronts a bias that is unfavorable toward women, people of differing genders and the LGBTQIA+ community. “Women experience injustice because they are women. LGBTQIA+ people experience injustice because of their gender and sexual identities. And gender nonbinary people experience injustice because they do not fit into the categories of male or female. The PCUSA is committed to working against gender-based discrimination and heteropatriarchy.” A few years ago, the General Assembly also edited the Book of Order and changed the language regarding marriage to make it more inclusive. We, as Presbyterians, choose to challenge *othering*. [<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/intersectional-priority-gender-justice-heteropatriarchy/>]

We are called not only to be a place of welcome and inclusion, but also to find ways to let people know that such a place exists. There are so many people who **need** a loving community, a place of belonging, a place of spiritual nurture, a place where they can be themselves. During my sabbatical this summer, I experienced a particular calling to make sure we are being fully inclusive and welcoming of folks who are gay, transgendered, non-binary individuals. Now, if I were one of those old-time revival ministers, I would say it like this: “God has put a burden upon my heart!” And that is exactly how it feels. You see, I met one of my nieces, who I formerly knew as my nephew. She is a transgender woman – a beautiful, compassionate child of God. We have had several deep conversations since this summer. One of the things that continues to be most disturbing to me is her perception and strong belief that there is **no church** that will be accepting of her and who she is. She believes that churches say they are welcoming to all, but when it comes down to it, they really are not. Since I have returned this fall, I have heard the same thing from several other individuals. It makes me sad, and I think this must make God very sad as well. We say “all are welcome here”. How are we making sure that is true, and how are we making it known to those who most need our hospitality?

I am also very concerned with the lack of mental health resources in our area and the role **we** can play in addressing the *othering* of the stigma often associated with it. Many of the people Jesus welcomed into his presence appeared to have mental health challenges – although at that time such things were attributed to demons. First Presbyterian has already taken steps to provide resources to promote mental health wellness. I wonder if there are additional ways for us to undo the stigma and increase our welcoming spirit to be aware of needs and how we work with and include people.

When I consider the community around us and who has been *othered*, I think of the children and youth, many of whom are experiencing the *othering* of bullying because of whatever someone has decided makes them different. There is an epidemic of anxiety and depression among our young people and a great need for a space that is open, supportive, and compassionate – a *brave* space, inclusive of all kinds of people and lived experiences, where young people feel comfortable learning, sharing, and growing . . . where you can be your authentic self and share as you wish. I believe the church can offer such a space.

Christ-like hospitality is challenging! Truly un-doing *othering* and welcoming all often requires risk and change. Ultimately, it all comes back to love – loving God and loving others -- and caring for ourselves in a way that inspires us to love and care for others. That is the fuel for the hospitality that God calls us to. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that he was nothing without love – it didn't matter how well-spoken he was or how prophetic or how faithful. Similarly, if we say “everyone is welcome” but do not show it by what we say and do, our words mean nothing. If we say our friends who are non-binary are welcome, but most of the bathrooms are gender-specific, our words are just noise. If we say we encourage community use of our space, but have furnishings that inhibit creative use, we may be seeing dimly. If we want to welcome our seasoned citizens, then we will do what we can to make our space accessible for differing needs. It's all about love – about caring – about extravagant hospitality in the mode of Jesus.

God can strengthen us for the challenging task of welcoming all, because ministry with and for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized is central to the heart of God. Recall the defining words, “Hospitality creates a safe, open place where a friend or stranger can enter and experience the welcoming spirit of Christ in another.” That is what **we** are all about. May God guide us to make it so. Amen.