

All Are Welcome

Psalm 82

Matthew 25: 31-46

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Psalm 82

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.” Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

Matthew 25: 31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

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Just as the 1991 school year was about to begin we attended an Ice Cream Social at a neighborhood UCC where my soon-to-be-first-grader’s son best friend attended church. We had been looking for a new church home—a better fit than the more conservative one we had been attending that really was a poor fit for our beliefs—and this seemed to be a fun way to try out a new church with no commitments, no strings attached. Looking around the vestry as we entered I immediately saw an ‘All Are Welcome’ sign. This was a familiar phrase from our own church

but I was about to understand it in a whole new and wonderful way as this sign also had a rainbow on it. As I stood looking at it, a church member came up and after saying hello she said, “We’re Open and Affirming, you know.” She said those few words with a clear sense of pride and happiness, and I was awkward and embarrassed as I could only respond, “You’re what?”

Over ice cream sundaes I learned about Open and Affirming, ONA, and understood for myself the pride and happiness that she and the congregation had in this powerful affirmation of welcoming and inclusivity for the gay and lesbian community.

In 1984, the MA Conference of the UCC passed a resolution to become the first Open and Affirming conference in the denomination. One year later the national General Synod passed a similar resolution. She explained that the UCC polity does not prescribe what each local church does so each individual church in the UCC would discern for themselves if they too would become an ONA congregation. In 1989, this church, Grace Church in Framingham, MA, became the 29th ONA church in the UCC.

They were drawn to become an ONA church as a golden rule justice issue, to follow the words of the psalmist, ‘give justice to the weak, and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. As they heard stories from church members and people in the community they had become painfully aware of the exclusion, the rejection, the invisibility, that those who identified as gay or lesbian endured if they dared to step out of the closet, or held onto in a silent loneliness if they hid their true self from the world, from their family, their friends, their church. They heard stories from parents and grandparents who saw their child, their grandchild, experience the pain, sometimes with heartbreaking results. Strong and vibrant people were weakened by the unjust judgement, attitude and response of those who rejected who and how they loved. Some were orphaned, abandoned, estranged, by their families, their churches. Their rights to date, to love, to marry, to talk about time together with their significant other, to even have a framed photo on a desk at work were trampled and denied.

My mind wandered back to high school with memories of kids shoved into lockers or ridiculed, harassed and bullied if anyone even thought they might be the G or L word. I thought of my cousin Jean and the denial she knew from my aunt and uncle so she lived a lifestyle that was not her or her choosing. I thought of my uneasiness and insecurity when I wasn’t always sure just what to say or how to act when I knew that I was accepting of a lifestyle not my own or saw expressions of it I didn’t understand.

I thought of what I had heard in church, in Scripture and sermons, and knew that I was hearing in a whole new way, a way that was affirming, loving, embracing and welcoming of all as it overturned tables of exclusion. My thoughts would later be expressed by The Reformation Project, a bible-based, Christian organization whose mission is to advance LGBTQ inclusion in the church, as they emphasize that ‘the arc of Scripture points toward inclusion, not exclusion.’

Throughout the Old Testament, God has an unfailing commitment to the vulnerable, calling on the powerful to help the powerless, especially when vulnerability and powerlessness are meted out as unjust judgement. And all of Jesus’ teachings can be summed up by the greatest commandment: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself, as on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

It took a bit of time after joining Grace Church before I understood better, deeper, what it meant to be an ONA congregation. At first I was only attentive to the justice, the mission, the connection, offered to those sought a faith home where they were welcomed, loved and

appreciated for who they were, just the way they were, so that sexual orientation was a gift, not a barrier. Over time however I saw how being ONA impacted the church in many ways. So often mission and outreach were way beyond the walls of our church, beyond the town line and even the national border as we provided extensive aid to our missionary in Indonesia, provided financial support to the UCC offerings, many worthy groups and worthwhile projects, but not local hands-on commitments.....yet.

Now in our pews, in the choir, in our lay leadership, in our education programs and in our social activities, we were seeing openness and affirmation come alive, thrive and blossom. Stories and experiences of healing and the relief of a true welcome abounded, and these came not only from the LGBTQ members and friends, but all who had found a true place of loving acceptance for who they were, and the stories and experiences they brought.

What began as a faith and justice mission of the congregation became a broad, wide, 3D view of living out Jesus' teachings. What had been understood as separating the sheep from the goats, the caring and compassionate from the uncaring and hard hearted, awakened us to a fuller view and understanding of what love in action truly looked like, and what action in love looked like. We were not ONA only as givers, but as receivers in ways we could not have imagined.

While we had thought that we were feeding those hungry for a faith home, giving a drink to those thirsting for acceptance, welcoming the often unwelcomed stranger, clothing the naked with affirmation, caring for those sick of society's denial of their life and dignity, and visiting those isolated in a prison of exclusion, we were reminded of so much more. All of us at one time or another have been—or will be-- hungry for something life affirming, thirsty for acceptance as a unique child of God, seeking a welcome when we are a stranger in a strange land, standing naked in our vulnerability, sick in our body and in our spirit, and imprisoned by challenges.

May each of us know that God loves and welcomes us all. Amen.