

Radical Hospitality — We Choose Welcome

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Based on John 6:35-39, “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.”

The story goes, I have been told, that many years ago — long before my time — a former pillar of this congregation walked out in disgust. *SPC used to be such a respectable church*, this person said. *Now, they take just ANYBODY!*

It was meant as a criticism. But even then, before the We Choose Welcome sign decorated our sanctuary, before the rainbow progress pride flag flew outside our Fellowship Hall, before the Micah 6:8 immigrant support signs protected our private spaces from extra judicial ICE raids — like the horrors unfolding in Frederick last week — before the word *woke* became an epithet, even then the criticism was received as a compliment.

Yes, we say with conviction here with SPC. We take EVERYBODY!

Or do we?

The meme on social media in these days of true terror for our immigrant families is this: *You cannot welcome both Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler*. You just can't.

Our ushers wrestled with this hypothetical last year as we gathered to discern how best to respond if ICE shows up here at our doors. This was before the reality of raids became clear to the broader White middle class public. In those initial conversations there was still a sense of selective safety here in our Shepherdstown bubble. If ICE shows up, some of us stated with a broad smile, WE CHOOSE WELCOME! We will show them on in, give them a cup of coffee, help them find a seat. We will love them the way Jesus loves them, we said. We will welcome them the way Jesus welcomes them.

We do not say that anymore. We cannot say that anymore. When true evil wreaks havoc for the most vulnerable in our midst, our baptismal commitment is to *renounce* it, not welcome it.

What does that mean for our ethic of Radical Hospitality?

The groundbreaking post-colonial Christian feminist theologian Letty Russell insists a biblical, Christ-based ethic of what she calls *JUST Hospitality* must de-center what we would call *power and privilege*. It is one thing

for me as a White, well educated, economically stable leader of a congregation that helped found the country to welcome a heartfelt, respectful debate on immigration with another White, well educated, economically stable leader or member of another congregation. It is a whole other thing for SPC to place our immigrant parishioners in mortal danger just because I want to play nice with my colleagues.

Welcoming the one who would welcome an ICE raid is not Radical Hospitality. It is a death sentence.

If we are truly to practice a *Just* Hospitality, Letty Russell insists, we must pay close attention to the power dynamics at work. Jesus does this in our Lesson through his refusal to allow the crowd to make him a king, over and above others. Jesus does this in our Lesson through his insistence that religious and political authority is only valid inasmuch as it cares for those on the margins. Jesus does this in our Lesson through declaring *HIMSELF* The Bread of Life — a nobody from the sticks of Galilee doing basic community organizing — in direct opposition to the Roman Empire declaring CAESAR as the powerful giver of bread to the weak and stumbling masses (from whose labor Caesar stole the bread in the first place).

Come to ME, Jesus tells the crowd amassing around him, and learn a different kind of power quotient. A ROUND table, as Letty Russell describes it, where no one can harm the other and everyone has what they need. No more and no less.

The pioneering civil rights lawyer and interfaith activist Valarie Kaur, from the Sikh tradition, says the same. If we truly wish to *See No Stranger*, as she titles her book on revolutionary love, we must cultivate a discipline not of *welcoming* those inflicting evil but of *loving* them. Ironically, we love the Hitlers of the world first and foremost by tending those wounded by the evil they inflict. Only then do we turn toward the perpetrators of harm and cultivate compassion for *their* wounds as well.

Valerie Kaur's question is not about welcoming both Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler but about whether or not in prioritizing our welcome of Anne Frank we are also willing to see Adolf Hitler as human, wounded, and capable of change. Our instinct is to demonize the demonizer. Our ethic of hospitality requires us instead to humanize them, with radical compassion, and a prayer that grace might transform their hearts and minds and actions, the same way grace has transformed ours.

The First Presbyterian Church of Douglas, Arizona offers an in the trenches model of this kind of Radical, Just, Revolutionarily Loving Hospitality. A bilingual community serving the borderlands of southern Arizona, Douglas Presbyterians worship one mile by car from the border checkpoint and half a mile as the crow flies from the monstrosity that is the wall along the U.S. - Mexico border. For those who are partisan, this portion of the wall was funded by the Clinton Administration.

No matter which political party is in power, Douglas Presbyterians are clear about their biblically-based

commitment (from the 19th chapter of Leviticus) to welcome the immigrant as if the immigrant were already a citizen in their midst. Douglas Presbyterians also partner with the the Lilly of the Valley Presbyterian Church of Agua Prieta, Mexico and the Presbyterian Border Ministry *Frontera de Cristo* to equip a Migrant Resource Center on the Mexico side of the border. Together they provide support for deportees dumped there daily with no way to get to their homes, usually deep within the interior of Mexico or even deeper into Central America.

The commitment of Douglas Presbyterians is clear. They do not welcome both Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler. Even so, roughly twenty years ago, the First Presbyterian Church of Douglas, Arizona did welcome into their membership, on the exact same Sunday, both an undocumented immigrant and a Border Patrol agent. Side by side, immigrant and agent reaffirmed their baptismal commitments. Side by side immigrant and agent were welcomed at the round table. Side by side immigrant and agent received the alleluia of the congregation.

It was a miracle.

The story went viral through the presbytery, where I was serving at the time. How in the world did the Douglas Presbyterians do it, we all wondered, as our own congregations were so dramatically pigeon-holed as either pro-immigrant or pro-Border Patrol. So we asked. And they answered.

Douglas Presbyterians did not welcome both an undocumented immigrant and a Border Patrol agent into membership on the same day by weakening their welcome for the immigrant. That welcome is sacrosanct. They will never stop prioritizing the well-being and safety of the most vulnerable in their midst.

They also did not do it by insisting the Border Patrol agent quit his job in order to be acceptable. Douglas Presbyterians know that Border Patrol does serve an essential service in confronting the evils of drug trafficking and human trafficking. Border Patrol often makes the life-saving difference between whether or not a migrant dies in the desert or makes it safely to the emergency room. Those who minister on the ground in the borderlands know the Border Patrol agent is an individual trying to function faithfully within a larger system of harm, the same way all of us with American citizenship are trying to function faithfully within a nation that causes global harm. All of us desperate for grace in the midst of these systems.

This level of spiritual discipline among the Douglas Presbyterians is already remarkable, but their commitment to solidarity with the most vulnerable required one step further. You are absolutely welcome here, the congregation said to the Border Patrol agent. *In the same way the lion in Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom is welcome to lie down with the lamb.* Meaning you, Border Patrol agent, in accepting the responsibilities of membership in the Body of Christ must commit to using your significantly greater power to *protect* your undocumented sibling in Christ. You do not get to use your power to harm her.

And the agent agreed. And the undocumented immigrant was able to trust this commitment.

That is some kind of Radical, Just, Revolutionarily Loving Hospitality! That is the kind of Radical, Just, Revolutionarily Loving Hospitality the SPC Session has reaffirmed in our Statement of Faith. We strive, to the best of our ability, in the words of the former pillar of this congregation, to shift our commitment from respectability to hospitality. Now we take just about ANYBODY.

We do not, however, choose welcome in a vacuum. We choose welcome from an ethic of solidarity with the most vulnerable. Not every welcome can look the same. No welcome is possible on our part without first receiving welcome ourselves. *Breathing in, we receive the welcome that is our birthright. Breathing out, we practice radical hospitality.* (Repeat)