

**Homecoming and Water Communion**  
**September 10, 2017**  
**Rev. Otto O'Connor**

Welcome.

This Unitarian Universalist community strives to be one of welcome. And so we welcome you no matter your color, no matter your gender, no matter who you love or how, no matter what pronoun you use, no matter what you believe or don't believe about God or Gods, no matter how you got here this morning, no matter your relationship status, no matter your employment status, no matter your citizenship or immigration status, no matter your country of origin, no matter if you are sick or well or waiting on test results, no matter your family structure, no matter if this is the first time you've stepped foot in our historic sanctuary or if you grew up coming here.

We welcome you.

These words are easy to say. And I have to admit, a little weird for ME to say. I mean, I'm your brand new minister. This is my first service, shouldn't YOU ALL be welcoming ME? Just saying.

Well, I might be the one standing up here right now, but I'm far from the first person welcoming you today.

Aisha, today's worship associate, welcomed us first. They read our standard welcome and greeting.

And then we greeted and welcomed each other.

And then our Music Director, Miranda, and two members of the choir, Aisha (again) and Yolanda sang to us "We Welcome You."

And Irene, our Director of Religious Education, and all the children who came up, shared with us a story of welcome, reminding us to welcome all those as if we are welcoming the most divine and sacred among us. As if we were welcoming God, right?

So though, right now, I'm standing here right now welcoming you, as your new Minister, this community, this church recognizes that it's the job of all of us to be welcoming. You might even say it's part of our ministry to be welcoming. Part of your ministry. Because, though I'm the one wearing a stole today, we are all ministers.

You know what else is welcoming?

Fifteen people showing up in the pouring, windy rain, for a beach service that your Minister optimistically thought would be fine last Sunday.

Yes, last Sunday, friends, I looked out my window in Malden and thought that the weather didn't look so bad and so I figured we could still hold the annual service on the beach.

And then, I actually got to the beach. And the rain was horizontal. And standing under the pavilion didn't really do much for the loud sound of wind and so I kinda had to cancel the service. Kinda my first service here. Oops.

But fifteen of you, you showed up. And I suspect, in part, because it was my first service.

That's welcoming.

And you know what else is welcoming? Your previous Interim Minister, the Rev. Wendy Bell, left me this sweet note on the pulpit:

"Welcome, Otto! As my daughter says: Keep calm and preach on!"

Our Universalist heritage honored the belief that everyone is saved, that everyone goes to heaven, that no one was spared from God's love. They believed that about single one of us, every single one of you. This belief remains highly controversial to this day, but there are still Universalist in this church right now and that spirit of welcoming, that no one is outside of that love, is ever present with us.

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism, inspired in part from this belief, states that we honor in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And our Universalist tradition helps us imagine a world where that kind of extravagant welcome is truly lived out. Because we need not think alike to love alike. That's a quote from John Wesley, a Methodist. "We need not think alike to love alike."

But, my friends, welcoming, true welcoming, goes beyond statements of "no matter you color or creed or gender you are welcome here." It goes beyond affirming the dignity of every person. Because true welcoming acknowledges that those things, your color, your creed, your gender, among many, many other things, acknowledges that those pieces of your identity actually do matter. That they shape our experience. It means treating people the way they want to be treated, not the way that we think they should. I mean listening to other's experiences and recognizing that they are different from our own and that that's ok.

This is why we proclaim that "Black Lives Matter," not "All lives matter," though certainly they do, because right now, the world is saying that they don't, so we bring attention to it by saying that they do.

This is why some of us have our pronouns on our nametags. Because we can't always assume we know how someone would like to be addressed.

This is why when the government says to undocumented immigrants "you are not welcome here" we recognize that some among us stand in a vulnerable position and that many of us don't. It means that we recognize where we must do our part to speak up

when our countries elected leaders that are the complete opposite of welcoming.

And while we can never fully understand another's experience, one thing we can do is trust that we don't know everything about it, that we can learn more about their experiences by listening to them.

Now, I'm not sure if you saw, I was in the news recently, covering my call to this historic congregation, the first parish in Malden, literally the first congregation in Malden. And some of these news segments focused on a particular aspect of my identity, and the fact that I am transgender.

And yes, this is an important part of my identity. It has shaped my life in countless ways.

But it's not my only identity. I'm a white man, and that impacts how the world sees me. I've got a college degree. I'm 32. I'm temporarily able bodied. I'm a citizen of the United States.

And yes, friends, I am also an immigrant. One from Canada, one with an easy path to citizenship, one who blends in, but an immigrant, none-the-less.

All of this to say that I'm a product of a system that was set up for me in more ways that it was set up against me. And I'm lucky for it. And true welcome recognizes all of these identities in their complexities.

And you, you, beautiful, wonderful people. You also have complex identities. Identities that are seen and not seen. Acknowledged and not acknowledged. Celebrated and shamed. And you bring all of that with you when you come to church.

How can we welcome you? All of you? Your struggles as well as your joys?

Like most things in life, to welcome fully is an impossible task. Yet it is one with deep roots in our history and a definition of who we are as a church. Which means we will continue trying to do our best to acknowledge our differences and honor them. To draw the circle wider.

And in the wider world, one where immigrants are told they are unwelcome, one where storms forces people out of their homes and communities, our values of justice and compassion ask that we advocate for welcome.

And as we move into the water communion ceremony, where we come bringing water from all the different places in our lives, we see how the many rivers flow into one bowl, the bowl of this communion. May it represent all the people of the earth in the web of life.

And so I say, again, welcome, from the words of our song of welcome:

"Whoever you are, we welcome you.

Wherever you come from, we welcome you.  
Whomever you love, we welcome you.”

Let us say together Amen, Amen.