



ONE

WELCOME OTHERS AS GOD WELCOMES YOU

GENESIS 1:1–2:4A;
GENESIS 2:4B–25

In his life and teachings, welcoming all, or *hospitality*, was central to Jesus and his Jewish faith. As a Jew, he was informed by the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) and frequently lifted up their imperative to welcome strangers. Hospitality is central to the history of ancient Israel and found throughout the Bible.

The first aspect to consider in this practice of hospitality is to always remember that we can welcome others only because we have first been welcomed by God. So, perhaps the place to begin is the beginning. The two biblical accounts of creation (Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–25) emphasize different aspects of God's actions. The first story describes how God created everything (living and nonliving) and saw that it was good. God affirms everything and everyone. In the second account, God places the two humans, Adam and Eve, in a garden and tells them to take care of everything.

In both creation stories, humans and all other living things are created and welcomed by God. A relationship is established. So a fundamental truth about hospitality is that we can welcome others only because we have first been welcomed and had a place prepared for us by God.

We belong here. We all do. Every. Living. Thing. This attitude is essential when we find ourselves in the position of host. We avoid any feelings of superiority over our guests because, at heart, we know them to be fellow creatures who have been created by God and are loved by God as we are. We treat them as we want to be treated when we are vulnerable guests.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

HOSPITALITY DEFINED

Consider the following definitions of hospitality by two theologians:

*“Hospitality is the practice of God’s welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”*²

—Letty M. Russell

*“A life of hospitality begins in worship, with a recognition of God’s grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God’s love and welcome to us.”*³

—Christine Pohl

To ponder:

- ➔ How have you felt welcomed by God?

- ➔ Reflect on a moment in your life when you witnessed hospitality as expressed in one of the definitions above. Write any words or phrases that come to mind here:

GOD WELCOMES ALL

Meditate for a few moments on the words to this song. You may want to sing it or say the words out loud:

“God Welcomes All” in *Glory to God* hymnal, #399, or bit.ly/FMWelcomesAll

God welcomes all,
strangers and friends;
God’s love is strong
and it never ends.⁴

2. Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19.
3. Pohl, *Making Room*, 172–73.
4. © 2008 WGRG, Iona Community (admin. GIA Publications, Inc.). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

GOD WELCOMES US IN CREATION

Creation stories are a common feature in religious communities from all different cultures and time periods. They are found in monotheistic and polytheistic religions. The purpose of creation stories within communities of faith is not to provide a scientific account of the beginning of the world, but rather to express humanity's relationship with the God(s) they worship and what their place in the world is.

The creation stories of the Christian faith are found in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. They, like many other religious creation stories, speak of a God/higher power who created a beautiful world and invited humanity into it. We welcome others because God first welcomed us.

A word about the creation stories in Genesis: Yes, there are actually two separate accounts of the creation of the world in Genesis. There is widespread agreement in the field of biblical scholarship that the book of Genesis was drawn from at least three sources. Each of the creation stories comes from a different source. To read more about this, see: bit.ly/FMSourceTexts.

Read Genesis 1:1–2:4a and respond to these questions:

- In what ways are God's actions in the story welcoming? How does this story make you feel welcomed by God?
- Are there limits placed on who is welcomed? Do you think it is right to place limits on whom you welcome? Why or why not?
- Are there any boundaries placed on the hospitality God offers? Is it good to have boundaries when you practice hospitality?



Now read the second account of creation found in Genesis 2:4b–25 and respond:

- In what ways are God's actions in the story welcoming? How does this story make you feel welcomed by God?
- Are there limits placed on who is welcomed? Do you think it is right to place limits on whom you welcome? Why or why not?
- Are there any boundaries placed on the hospitality God offers? Is it good to have boundaries when you practice hospitality?

Think about both stories.

- How does having both stories deepen our understanding of God's hospitality? What would we lose if we had only one of them?

Why are we looking at the creation stories to understand Christian hospitality? Because one could argue that creating the world and inviting humans to be a part of it was the greatest act of hospitality ever done. God chose to share the world that God created with humanity.

FINDING GENESIS 2:4B–25

Much of the Hebrew Testament (what many Christians call the Old Testament) was handed down orally from generation to generation. When it was finally written down, no chapters or verses were assigned. They were added centuries later. Sometimes a verse contains the end of one sentence and the beginning of another. So, when it says the text is Genesis 2:4b–25, it means chapter 2 of Genesis, from the second part of verse 4 through verse 25.

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Welcoming others as God has welcomed us has always been a core practice of Christian faith communities. When we gather in worship, we give thanks to a welcoming God and extend welcome to all. Let's focus on two ways churches show hospitality: through clear welcome statements and through offering sanctuary to support people who especially need hospitality.

CHURCH WELCOME STATEMENTS

Mission statements or other statements of welcome are often printed in worship bulletins and other printed materials about the church. Words that are spoken in worship also reflect the kind of welcome a church seeks to extend to others. Consider the following welcome statements from two churches.

“United in Spirit and inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.”

—www.firstcongucc.com/ucc

“This church welcomes all to our services of worship and into the full life, leadership and ministry of this church. We are an inclusive community that embraces all people regardless of race, ethnic background, age, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, social or economic situation, marital or family status, biblical interpretation or political persuasion. We welcome all in love as Jesus Christ welcomes all of us. We celebrate that we are all God’s beloved children with gifts to share for the just and peaceable reign that God intends. We believe in living out our faith and ministry by loving, learning, giving and serving each other and the world, and by being a place for everyone to meet God, no matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey.”

—bit.ly/FMCorydonPres

- How do these welcome statements make you feel about the church?
- What does each statement tell you about that church’s understanding of who God is?

Write a welcome statement for a church you would like to be part of:



SANCTUARY OFFERS WELCOME

Church ministries of hospitality vary widely, depending on the gifts of members and needs of all, from providing a meal to homeless people to opening their building as a sanctuary to immigrants facing deportation.



*What other examples of practicing hospitality have you seen or experienced in your community?
In our country? In the world?*

The following link, bit.ly/FMPCUSASanctuary, introduces you to some of the history of the sanctuary movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and includes some short videos about a woman who sought sanctuary and one Presbyterian congregation that chose to become a sanctuary church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America voted in August 2019 to become a Sanctuary Denomination. Read more at bit.ly/FMELCASanctuary.

Many Christians participate in non-church-related organizations that provide hospitality to immigrants. Grannies Respond/Abuelas Responden is a grassroots movement formed in 2018 in response to the separation of families seeking asylum at the southern border of the United States. The organization practices hospitality by doing things like meeting asylum seekers at bus stations with snacks and hygiene kits and toys for children. Learn more about Grannies Respond at bit.ly/FMGranniesRespond.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

You certainly already practice welcome to others in your life. This is a moment to reflect on that practice and consider how to deepen it. Our approach in this unit will not be one of practicing a different kind of hospitality with each session, but rather improving our readiness for welcoming others. We begin this first session by doing some self-reflection on gifts needed to practice welcome and learning about our implicit biases. Future sessions will focus on learning about the other, building skills, and, finally, practicing hospitality with others who are different from you.

HOSPITALITY SELF-EXAM

Spend a few minutes reflecting on gifts that are necessary to practice welcome. Use the space below to record your responses.

1. List various behaviors, skills, and traits that are beneficial for practicing hospitality, such as being a good listener, flexibility, or cultural sensitivity.
2. Go through the list and put a check mark by those you think are your strengths.
3. Circle those you think you need to work on. (Remember, not everyone who practices hospitality has to be an extrovert or comfortable meeting new people. There are different ways to practice hospitality; doing this exercise may help you stretch outside your comfort zone and also identify what types of hospitality you prefer to engage in.)



IMPLICIT BIAS

Sometimes, we may not know something is a barrier for us, either because of our own lack of exposure to certain cultures or because of biases we may hold unconsciously.

What is your comfort zone when it comes to socioeconomic class issues?

Take this “Hidden Rules” quiz developed by Dr. Ruby Payne and find out: bit.ly/FMPayneQuiz.



What implicit biases do you hold? If you are interested in exploring this topic, online tests can identify some of these. If you take one of these tests, you may or may not agree with the results, but, hopefully, it will challenge you to reflect on the biases you hold without even realizing it. One example of these tests is Project Implicit from Harvard University (bit.ly/FMProjectImplicit).

Questions to ponder:

- ➡ What did you learn about yourself by taking these quizzes?
- ➡ Did the results surprise you? Why or why not?
- ➡ After exploring this introduction to the Christian practice of hospitality and doing some self-reflection, what are ways you might improve your practice of hospitality to others near and far?

FOLLOWING JESUS

In this session, we spent time reflecting on a fundamental aspect of “Welcome All,” or hospitality. We can welcome others only because God first welcomes us. Because of God’s wildly inclusive love, we are able to practice that sort of divine love with others. We saw how God first created and welcomed humans and all creatures to this world. We looked at how churches show welcome to others. We thought about the gifts needed to practice welcome and some challenges we all face, called implicit bias.

Before we look at the second aspect of “Welcome All” — “See Christ in Everyone” — take a few moments to think about everything you have learned in this session and how it informs what hospitality means to you. Then watch the YouTube video “Carrie Newcomer-Room at the Table” (bit.ly/FMNewcomerTable, 3:57).

Write or speak a prayer, asking God to help you
make room in your life to welcome others.