The Upside Down Welcome Community CRC, Kitchener, Oct 25, 2026
Genesis 14: 17-24 Luke 9: 1-6 Acts 13: 44-52

Introduction

It has been a little over a year since my wife, Alice, and I moved from Nova Scotia. We moved to be near our children. Our two sons are nearby. Our daughter lives in Toronto, but we still love her. During my 20 or so years in that province, my days as a Christian Reformed Pastor came to an end, but in many ways, I still identify with what I believe were many wonderful and useful things I learned as Christian Reformed youth, and eventually, a pastor. Although my leaving the CRC was very disruptive, it lead to many years of amazing ministry. And I want to share a briefly a few experiences from that time of ministry – a few things that happened to me, things that relate to what I want to say this morning.

The first story comes from my years as a Christian chaplain with Nova Scotia Youth Corrections. If you were in custody (jail you might call it) in Nova Scotia and were under the age of 18, I would get to see you. Most of the inmates were male, but during 2012 there were two 16 year old girls there for attempted murder. This next bit may sound shocking but the two girls had tried to kill the mother of one of them. I spoke with the mother. She told me that the attack left a lot of blood in the house; that she survived because she managed to claw her way to a bathroom and hold the door shut against the two girls.

Now, these two girls became involved in the chapel program. They learned about the Christian life and faith, they accepted the path with Jesus, and I baptized them

both in the pool of the facility. And then last February, Amy, one of them texted me. Could I do her wedding? Well, of course. The wedding took place at the end of this past September. I had a great time meeting Amy's family and friends, and I will be seeing them again at the end of November.

A second story: When my ministry as a Christian Reformed Pastor fell apart, my ministry credentials went to another denomination. It was, as you can imagine, a time of anxiety, and prayer. However, my wife got a full time job teaching, and I began to pray for next steps for me. One day, I stepped into the small town library where we were living. I began chatting with the staff about where we lived and what Alice and I and both did. "Oh," the staff said. "So you are a minister?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well," they said, "isn't the United Church down the road looking for a part-time pastor?"

"That is very interesting," I said. "What else can you tell me about that?"

They gave me some names and telephone numbers. When I got back to my car I thought, "Well Lord, I guess I am going to dial one of the numbers." I did. A gentleman answered. I explained to him how I got his number and why I was calling.

He said, "This afternoon, most of the committee that is searching for a pastor are at the church; you can go and see them." So I did. To make a long story very short, that group of 20 or so elderly folks kept me for seven years. And I remember so clearly wondering at the beginning of those seven years, "Lord, what am I supposed to be doing here?" The answer came to me. *Of course you are going to*

speak about and preach the good news of Jesus. But you also are to love the people. And to be honest, I kind of grew up in that church. I had to abandon a lot of my ideas about what a church should do. I had to begin by appreciating the people for who they were and then seeing where God would lead.

My last story comes from an earlier time. Early in our marriage, Alice and I both went back to school. During my last year at McMaster University, I went with a student group on a tour of Russia. It was a wonderful trip. About a month after we returned, we met for a reunion. By that time I had been accepted into Calvin seminary. I was so surprised that at the reunion, one of the other students brought a bottle of wine so that the whole group could toast my being trained to be a pastor.

Now, here is the common thread to these three stories. Maybe you have guessed it. **I was welcomed.** A convicted young woman, welcoming me to join her friends and family for her wedding. A small church of elderly folks welcoming me to be their pastor. A group of largely non-Christian university students, welcoming me by celebrating with me my acceptance into seminary.

Growing up in church, and as a student studying to become a pastor, I had absorbed a certain understanding of welcome and hospitality. I had been taught that it was my job as a follower of Jesus to *welcome the stranger*. So, in my first church as a pastor, I went out of my way to welcome a family where one of the family members faced possible deportation back to Lebanon. I had been taught

that it was the job of the church *to welcome diverse people groups*. And so, as a university chaplain I loved working with Chinese graduate students who were becoming Christians. I had been taught that I should *reach out to people on the streets*. That is why for years I worked with a group called Open Arms in Nova Scotia. I met people on the streets and once a week would take my guitar and lead an informal church service and spend time with the people there.

But at the same time, as you can see from the three stories I told, it wasn't just me doing the welcoming. Welcoming, hospitality and friendship – these were not a one way street where I or the church was doing all the welcoming, providing all the hospitality, and reaching out in friendship. I have experienced many reverse welcomes. Welcoming, hospitality and friendship came back to me.

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This, I believe, is a pattern that we see many times in the Bible. What I want to do next is to look at some Bible passages where we can see this. We can begin in the Old Testament, the pre-Jesus part of the Bible. Let's look at Abraham.

Abraham and Old Testament Reverse Welcomes

We meet Abraham near the beginning of the Bible. Abraham, or Abram, follows the direction of God and finds himself living in a warring region, in the land of Canaan, modern day Israel. One day, an alliance of four war lords attacked five neighbouring people groups. Four attacking five; I call the attacks, the War of the Nine Kings.

Now, when those warring groups did their raiding, there was a lot of pillaging, looting, and abduction. Abram's own nephew, Lot and his family were kidnapped. People from the nearby city of Sodom were taken, along with the possessions of the people.

When Abram heard that these terrifying things had happened, he rounded up 300 of his own men who were able fighters, "trained men", the text says. He rescued Lot, Lot's family. He also rescued people who had been kidnapped out of the city of Sodom. Now, let's read about the welcome Abram received when he came back from the rescue operation.

After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand."

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself."

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing

belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me—to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share."

When he arrived back home, Abram got a great welcome from the king of Sodom. The king told him, *Yes, please return my people, but you can keep all of the goods you have recovered for yourself.* (Abram didn't keep any of the spoils of that war; he returned the people *and* property of Sodom.) And besides that welcome, a kind of a holy man, a king, a priest, Melchizedek, from the nearby city of Salem, also came to welcome Abram. Melchizedek provided bread, wine and a blessing for Abram.

Now, you might remember that God had told Abram that he would be a blessing to the all the nations of the earth. But in this story, not only is Abram a blessing to the neighbouring cities like Sodom which had been attacked. He also finds himself welcome in his new home. Welcomed by the kings of Sodom and Salem. I would guess that Abram returned to his own encampment a somewhat happy man that evening.

Joseph

Consider also the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. If you know the story of Joseph, you may remember that through Joseph God saved Egypt from starvation during a long famine. But we also see that Joseph was welcomed into the highest courts of Egypt. And when Joseph was reunited with his father and brothers after

many years, the ruler of Egypt made sure that Joseph's whole extended family had a place where they could settle and rebuild their lives.

Elijah and Elisha

Or recall the account of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. I will read a few lines from the story to make my point.

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah]: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food."

And remember the story of the Old Testament prophet, Elisha. I will just read about the welcome he received.

One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

New Testament: Jesus and the Disciples

This pattern – going out to welcome people, and receiving a welcome – continues in the experiences of Jesus and his disciples. At one point while Jesus is travelling through Israel with his disciples, the time came for him to authorize his disciples to go out on their own and to do what Jesus himself had been doing. I am going to read from Luke 9, the first few lines.

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you,

leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

You can see clearly that the disciples will be relying on the welcome and hospitality of the people they go out to meet. I would say, actually, that Jesus lived like an Old Testament traveling prophet; he taught his disciples to do the same. This, I think, can give us a lot of insight into Jesus' understanding of himself and his instructions for the early church. I believe that these instructions are for the church today also, but that is another topic for another time.

New Testament: Paul and Barnabas

Our last example of people in the Bible comes from the Book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas are on a missionary journey. This is after the death, resurrection, and return to heaven of Jesus. Paul and Barnabas are in the city of Antioch, in the south of today's Turkey.

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews [leading authorities, not all the Jews by any means] saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles [non-Jews]. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

"'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

Did you catch that? Paul and Barnabas were being tossed out by many of the Jewish authorities. But the non-Jewish people were glad to welcome them; they honoured the message Paul and Barnabas brought them.

Today

Now let's fast forward to today. Today, I often reflect on the fact that my own life as a minister, a pastor, did not turn out as I thought it would. It seems that I have been in a lot of places, trying to welcome people and help them join in following Jesus Christ. But also, in all my travelling, visiting and speaking, I have been welcomed by so many people in some amazing places. I thought I was supposed to welcome people into the church. But I also discovered reverse welcomes. So many have people welcomed me.

A couple of months ago, I learned that here at Community CRC, this fall, you have been considering God's call to welcome people into community with Jesus. Absolutely, we must welcome people into the family of God. But I think that the biblical stories we have been looking at show us that when we extend the welcome of God, there will be a reverse welcome. We discover that when we go out to meet and welcome people, that there is also a welcome extended to us.

It is true, those who bring the welcome of God do not always get a good reception. We just saw this in the Bible reading about Paul and Barnabas. Christians around in many nations, especially in the Islamic world, are harassed, jailed or even killed. And bringing the message of Jesus is always a challenge right here where we are. Nevertheless, I believe that we should take heart from the experiences of God's people in the Bible. Many found surprising welcomes.

I do not know what surprising welcomes you have found or what welcomes are in store for you here in Southwestern Ontario. Earlier this year I witnessed a church being welcomed. Last Easter my wife and I sang with a choir. We visited a seniors' retirement facility to sing there. We brought the message of Jesus's death and resurrection through the choir pieces. It was a happy moment, not only because we were able to share the message of Christ, but also because we experienced a welcome. The residents welcomed us. And so did the staff: they thanked us for coming to sing. That's a modest local example, but it illustrates what I hope you also have experienced. We go out to welcome people to put their trust in God. And we find that they welcome us in return.

So, we should carry on with the mission God has given us right here where we are, reaching out and welcoming people into fellowship with our Saviour. And we should not be too surprised if the welcomes we give comes back to us from the people God sets in our path.

Please join me in prayer: Lord God, you have challenged us to proclaim the message and the love of Jesus to the ends of the earth, including right here in

Kitchener and the surrounding towns. Help us to share with our neighbours, to make friends in the places where people live and gather. And open our hearts to the welcome that others may give us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen

Reverse Welcomes
1. Some Personal Experiences
2. Reverse Welcomes in the Old Testament
- **Abraham and the Battle of the Nine Kings**
- **Plus: Joseph, Elijah and Elisha**

3. And in the New Testament
- **Jesus and the Twelve Disciples**
- **Paul and Barnabas in Antioch**

Today - What Welcomes Might We Experience?