

**“The Welcome Wagon”**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**United Church of Christ – Open & Affirming Celebration**  
**June 28, 2020**  
**By Rev. Floren “Tino” C. Cordova, Pastor, Iao UCC**

**Romans 6:12-23**  
**Matthew 10:40-42**

Prayer: Gracious and loving Creator who values each of us as beloveds, who gives each of us self-worth that is beyond any human measure. Today, help us to realize that we “are” the welcome wagon you seek to send forth to a world in need – to a community in need – and to a church striving to bring your good news to ALL your people. In your many and holy names, we pray – Amen & Amene.

Last week, we talked about value – about how we flourish as a society – as a church when we value each other’s gifts. We talked about how we are free to blossom, to grow and to thrive when we allow ourselves and others to flourish. Today, let us ask of ourselves, this question as we continue on from last week’s message – what is then our purpose? Especially during this time of virtual worship, social distancing, trying to keep ourselves, our loved ones and others safe – what is our purpose. What is the call that God is asking of us during this time of social distancing as a society and as a church? What is it that God is calling us to do and be as Iao United Church of Christ in today’s world? Remember church – I cannot stress this enough, even from our House Churches – we are still the deployed Iao United Church of Christ.

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” When I did my internship in California for one of my seminary classes – we wanted to know how many churches within the city of Concord were open and affirming congregations. This question is fitting for today’s

celebration as our denomination United Church of Christ is celebrating open and affirming Sunday today. What we found fascinating is how many churches in the area were claiming to be open in welcoming the lesbian, gay, Bi-sexual, transgender, and queer or questioning community – notice how I didn't say the “affirming” part. Many of us have heard this phrase – “hate the sin, love the sinner” ideology. For me, this falls under that type of ideology. Many churches were open to having the LGBTQ+ Community sitting in their pews – but would not affirm their orientation, their marriages, their relationships and so basically, would not affirm their humanity, since we are ALL born in God's divine image. This was like a welcome wagon without a wheel – it was an incomplete welcome. People being welcomed to sit in the pews for the sake of filling up the sanctuary and most importantly, for filling up the offering plate. When speaking to some of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters at that time – many did feel welcomed by many churches in the area but not affirmed. “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” Again, I believe such churches fall into the category of “hate the sin, love the sinner” as if they are doing anyone a favor with such a statement. What kind of love is that beloved community? We love you, but you have to confirm to our way of thinking, not to God's way, but to our way.

Beloved church – beloved virtual world – if we are to truly welcome ALL people – ALL of God's beloved children – we must do so in the name of Christ himself. Going back to this statement – “love one another as I have loved you.” Period! “Love one another as I have loved you.” Period! Jesus doesn't say with the exception of – this statement isn't followed up with any statement like – except this person or that person – this group or that group – this skin color or that skin color – this culture or that culture – NO! “Love one another as I have loved you.” Period! That is the kind of welcome wagon that is complete, that is genuine, authentic – that

is backed up by actions of love – backed up by how we treat each other. If the church is truly the “body of Christ” – then how we welcome others into our society, our families, our churches – then we as a church needs to reflect on WWJD – “What would Jesus do?”

Our hospitality – from our House Churches, our community, our society – should seek to honor our faith. Beginning with the early church – the first nomadic leaders of the Church were fully dependent on the kindness of strangers. How these faith leaders won followers was done by not only how they preached the Gospel – but how they lived it – how they inspired others to live by it through the actions of those preaching. Many of us Pastor’s get it – we know how many tend – even today – how as soon as we introduce ourselves as Reverend or Pastor – people tend to shy away – of which I cannot blame them. For far too long, many churches – many pastors – many reverends, many church leaders have been less than welcoming to not only the LGBTQ+ community, but to many who did not conform to doctrine, tradition or their boxed thinking of God or of Christ. Hospitality then – is extended to the far few and the privileged. Words and actions of the church – of the pastors – of the prophets were at times hurtful, harmful like a sword to many who were searching and seeking a community who would love and affirm them – not to abuse and harm them spiritually. So I do understand why many of God’s children shy away from churches and church leaders. Our reward is how we inspire people to realize how they are loved by God – just for who they are – “love one another as I have loved you.” Period!

If we were to analyze “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me” it has nothing to do with a building. Has nothing to do with a building but with a state of being. “Welcome to this house” – we sang this morning for me is a state of being – welcome to this house of God from within us, from within our heart and soul – that is the house of God! The

welcome wagon is within each of us – how those we meet on a daily basis feel welcomed in our presence and how they feel welcomed by God’s presence radiating through our words and our actions. How we express the Jesus of the Gospels if felt not because of a building structure – but because of our state of being. That is how the whole church welcomes ALL people – no matter who they are or where they come from or where they are on life’s journey – ALL and absolutely ALL are welcomed. This is the kind of welcome Jesus is expressing in the Gospel reading this morning – not a building but a state of being – which understandably is easy to do from our House Churches. No matter where we are physically, in the sanctuary or in our House churches – we ARE the welcome wagon for ALL of God’s people no matter where from! ALL and absolutely ALL are welcomed and not just welcomed but affirmed.

So, what then is our purpose church – what then is our purpose brothers and sisters out there in our virtual world? Surely we cannot fall into the trap of the old-tired ideology that says only some are loved – only the privileged few are welcomed? Our purpose then is to say ALL and absolute ALL are welcomed into a state of being loved, welcomed, and affirmed. This allows everyone to feel how valuable they are in God’s eyes and frees them to flourish.

Let us close with this. Again – recalling from last Sunday – you and I – the collective “we” – matter to God – we are valued by God. So, let us have our welcome wagons hitched and ready to welcome into our presences – into our state of being, with a great sense of hospitality – and affirmation – ALL of God’s children. Let us love and affirm one another as we move forward in life as our authentic selves. Iao United Church of Christ – an open and affirming Congregation – without apology – welcomes ALL of God’s Children – where ALL truly means ALL.

**Amen, Amene, Ashe, A-ho, and Alleluia.**