

## God's Extravagant Welcome: Extending Citizenship

*The Rev. John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, UCC  
A sermon given at the Annual Meeting of the Southern California - Nevada Conference,  
United Church of Christ, June 18, 2005, meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada*

*"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19.33-34).*

This February [in 2005] I had the privilege of visiting our partner churches in India, experiencing the vitality of the churches our missionaries helped found beginning with the first voyage of the American Board in 1813. The trip included visits to church leaders, time at several seminaries, and visits to projects we have supported through our Common Global Ministries Board. We helped dedicate a school dormitory for poor rural girls in Chennai, a facility that will give access to the higher levels of secondary and university education for girls previously shut out of these opportunities because distance made commuting impossible and the school fees were more than their families could afford. Through your gifts, one hundred girls, through the extravagant welcome of the church, have hope for a future that does not include crushing poverty.

Later in the trip I and my traveling companions - James Vijayakumar of our Southern Asia office, and Lydia Veliko, our ecumenical officer- had gone to the very southern tip of India to the coastal town of Colachel where Vijay's brother and sister-in-law run the family hospital, the James Hospital, founded by their father. Our welcome there was quite an experience. Lined up at the front door to the hospital was the staff, and lining the walkway toward the door were teenage girls, nursing students - beautifully dressed in identical saris. As we walked toward the door they showered us with flower petals, a spectacular array of color and fragrance after a long, weary, and as is often the case on the roads in India, a terrifying day of travel! It was an extravagant welcome rivaling the welcome I've received in Pacific Islander gatherings over the years. (And they didn't make me dance in India!

The James Hospital was at the center of tsunami rescue efforts on December 26. Within minutes of the wave that devastated the fishing villages on the beach, trucks began arriving at the hospital compound with victims. James Premkumar and his wife, Sugaia, quickly organized the hospital grounds into a trauma center, sorting the dead from the living, resuscitating the nearly dead and bandaging the injured. They treated hundreds that day while sending hundreds more to makeshift morgues. We visited the now barren beaches, saw how the wave had carried over the palm trees sweeping away homes, shattering the fishing fleet, and hurling children and adults to their deaths. We stood by a mass grave for 97 unidentified victims, and watched a little girl, less than five, point to a board with seventy five pictures of the children of Colachel who were lost. She pointed to her two older brothers. Where had they gone she must have wondered.

Later in the evening and for much of the next day we spent hours visiting with the over one hundred victims still living at the Hospital six weeks after the tsunami, most not needing treatment but having no place to go or simply too emotionally traumatized to leave. We heard them tell their harrowing tales of survival and loss in a language we could not understand about a grief we could not comprehend. We listened to their stories, held their hands, embraced, made a sign of the cross. They crowded the wards and rested in the courtyard. They are fed and housed by the hospital without question. None can offer money, so the hospital manages on gifts from UCC congregations here, from family resources, from aid through the Church of South India, and from donations in the community. A large banner outside the hospital announced, "Tsunami victims treated here for free." The same nursing students who earlier had showered us with flower petals worked late into the evening, comforting and consoling those who are weeping and those who seemingly have no tears. As in the welcome to us, they embodied in this care the God who showers weary travelers - strangers - with the rich fragrance and colors of grace.

“Jesus didn’t turn people away; neither do we.” No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” The now well known phrases of our God is Still Speaking commercial, and the giddy media frenzy of Advent, seemed a long way away that night in India. Spongebob seemed a long way away! Yet the witness of that hospital offered an extravagant welcome echoing the words of our own familiar red and black banners. Persons who have been traumatized in very different ways, who have known rejection and exclusion and hurt from the church, found in our banners and in our commercial an extravagant welcome, and they have responded with emails and letters of profound and at times almost incredulous gratitude.

One little girl wrote us this Lent. She has a degenerative spinal disease that requires her to sit in a wheel chair. She saw someone in a wheel chair in our ad and asked, “Does she have the same disease I have?” Is there a place, she seemed to ask, for someone like me, someone who has known what it means to be different, to be excluded, to be feared by other children, by other adults? Is there an extravagant welcome for me? This is the question before us at a time when extravagant welcome even to each other in the church seems so counter cultural. We vote to leave the covenant when grace is offered in ways that seem indiscriminate or undisciplined. We withhold citizenship, not only in the church, but also in our land, when the stranger is deemed too different, too alien, too strange. Is there a word for us?

In 1662 our Puritan and Congregationalist forebears in New England struggled with the question of baptism, of who might be baptized and granted citizenship in the household, the commonwealth of God, of who might appropriately be excluded. The specific question was whether the children of adults who had been baptized, who were faithful in church attendance and discipline, but who had never experienced regeneration in a way that might be testified to among the deacons of the congregation, whether those children might receive baptism and share, as they grew up, in the covenant of grace. The conclusion of those Puritan divines is instructive:

Baptism, which is the seal of membership in the church, the body of Christ. . . , is not to be made a common thing, nor to be given to those, between whom and the Godless licentious world there is no visible difference: This would be a provocation and dishonour to the Holy One of Israel. On the other hand, we find in Scripture, that the Lord is very tender of his grace; he delighteth to manifest and magnify the riches of it, and that he cannot endure any straitening or eclipsing thereof. . . . Hence we dare not exclude the same children of the faithful from the covenant. . . Neither dare we exclude the same children from membership when they are grown up. . . . God owns them still, and they do in some measure own him; God rejects them not, and therefore neither may we; and consequently their children also are not to be rejected.

“The Lord is very tender of his grace, he delighteth to manifest and magnify the riches of it, and he cannot endure any straightening or eclipsing thereof.” The language is archaic, but the meaning clear. There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea. The Half-Way Covenant did not extend to all the baptized the privilege of the Table. That remained reserved for those regenerated, for the “visibly elect.” Thus it was “half-way.” Even so, the authors recognized they would be exposed to criticism from all sides: “We are not ignorant that this our labor will be diverse by diversely censured; some will account us too strict in the point of baptism, and others too lax and large.” Sound familiar?

It’s not just in the church that Americans have struggled with the question of whether to extend citizenship. In spite of the welcome carved in the foundation of the Statue of Liberty, “the tired, restless poor yearning to breath free” have often been rejected from our shores or received with ambivalence. The same New Englanders who found a way to lower the fences around the baptismal fount in the 17th century, and then around the Table in the 18th century, lamented the arrival of the Irish and the Italians in the 19th century with their different culture and their priests and bishops. Political cartoons portrayed those immigrants as reptiles crawling from the sea onto the shores of Massachusetts and Connecticut, their crocodile jaws formed in the shape of Catholic bishops’ mitres. The framers of the Chinese exclusion acts in the late 19th century cruelly and, of course, inaccurately described the Asians they had brought to California to build the railroads as sub-humans favoring filthy squalor in opium dens in San Francisco, men and women who would cavalierly offer their children into slavery. An editorial in the Butte, Montana newspaper, opined that “The Chinaman’s life is not our life, his religion is not our religion, he belongs not

in Butte.” When Great Falls made a bid to become the capitol of Montana, its slogan was, “Great Falls for the Capitol. No Chinese.”

In the middle of the twentieth century Jews seeking to flee the holocaust received, for the most part, a cold shoulder from the United States; many who were refused sanctuary here had to wait years to be liberated from the camps by soldiers of that same nation. Most, of course, never survived for liberation. During the 1940's Japanese citizens lost the privileges of citizenship in a time of racist fear, some interned not far from here. Today our southern borders continue to fence out the poor; the fortunate ones who elude the border patrol face dehydration in the desert or abuse in migrant labor camps all across the land. The central narratives of our history, and our deepest shame, is the genocide of those who arguably had the greater claim to citizenship, native Americans, indigenous people, whose surviving descendents now struggle to live with the ambiguity of dual tribal and American citizenship. And to that shame we add the forced migration of Africans, welcomed as slaves, as two-thirds citizens, constitutionally deemed only a fraction of the worth of white citizens. Arguably the defining struggle of America has been the transformation of some of God's children from being perceived as property to being welcomed as citizens, a struggle that still continues. The Amistad event, battled in the churches, the courts, and the public square, and the American Missionary Association that carried this struggle forward in the face of segregation, separate and unequal schools, lynching, denial of the right to vote, and back of the bus, was all about the pilgrimage from property to citizenship. The journey across the bridge toward Selma was about claiming citizenship. The March on Washington was about the descendants of property claiming the divine rights of citizenship. Yet even in the face of steps toward a more extravagant welcome, we remain uncertain. Today's Patriot Act is not just a reaction to 9/11, a strategic response to terror, but is in fact part of the ignoble heritage of our nation's long trajectory of reluctance to extend citizenship to the stranger, the alien, to those who are different, a reluctance often manipulated by fear. At best we have been ambivalent. And too often the church has followed suit. Sometimes not even half way.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians turns on this very point. Could Jews extend to Gentiles “citizenship” in the covenant? Could Gentiles extend to Jews hospitality? Could the “far off” as Paul describes them, “be brought near?” And could the hostility be brought to an end? Could the dividing wall be broken down? Paul reminds the Gentiles that they were at one time “aliens from the commonwealth, strangers to the covenants of promise.” Now, in Christ, “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” Could those who are alien, strange, different, indeed in some sense repulsive, be brought near from the safety of a far distance? Could citizenship be extended?

The letter of Peter struggles with a similar theme, recalling that Jesus himself, while chosen and precious in God's sight, is rejected by mortals, yet like a rejected stone at a building site, now chosen to become the cornerstone. Then Peter turns to the Christian community, aliens in the empire of Rome. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.” A holy nation. Citizens. Once “not a people.” Now God's people. For Peter and for Paul at the heart of the gospel is a welcome extended to the rejected, to the excluded, a welcome that reaches far beyond “half way” and that is not just about hospitality, but about citizenship.

This summer the United Church of Christ will once again take up this question of citizenship in two emotionally and theologically charged sets of resolutions coming before the General Synod. They deal with citizenship in the church, citizenship in the enduring covenants of the Abrahamic faith, citizenship in the commonwealth of the state. One set of resolutions deals with whether a marriage license should be given to same gender couples by the state and whether the church ought to bless those relationships as they would a marriage between a man and a woman. Last year's action by this Conference is one of those resolutions. The second set of resolutions draws us into the challenging historical and contemporary struggles of Israelis and Palestinians to claim citizenship in secure and just borders in a land they share and contest. Once again, as with our ancestors, we are asked to consider what it means to be an alien, what it means to be a citizen, of who is “near” and who is “far” and how the Gospel of grace is to be lived out amid the competing claims of those who sometimes fight over where to establish the borders and boundaries of civil and ecclesiastical life.

At face value the heat in the marriage debate is generated by competing interpretations of scripture, of how one is to discern God's will for the contemporary church in a few texts of the Bible, so contested, for some so definitive, for others so minimal and obscure. The Biblical text is not to be excluded from the debates; the scriptures are the rule of faith and moral practice for the Christian community. But as was the case with slavery over a century ago, or the leadership of women in the church, these interpretation debates often mask a deeper Biblical reality, namely, the reality of human sin and our profound ambivalence over "the other," the stranger, the alien in our midst. The murderous jealousy of Joseph's brothers, the mortal combat between the two brothers, Cain and Abel, the makeshift clothing that Adam and Eve fashioned to hide what had suddenly become their shameful nakedness and their physical differences from one another, their hiding from the Creator in the Garden, even their desire to be "like God" and to forsake their "difference from God," the journey back toward our origins and the dream of Eden reminds us that, at the heart of human existence, suspicion and fear of difference lurk close at hand. And one of the ways we put boundaries around difference is to withhold citizenship.

A birth certificate, a social security card, a driver's license, a passport - these pieces of paper are more than bureaucratic documents. They signify citizenship, belonging. Think about the meaning of a voter registration card in Freedom Summer in Mississippi in 1963. A colleague of Jane's and Dan's and mine recently told the story of finding his German immigrant grandfather's citizenship papers, saved as a cherished possession through the years. "No longer a subject of the Prussian emperor, now a citizen of the United States." These documents portray status in the community granting certain rights and privileges but, above all, inclusion in the commonwealth. Only a few of us, I suspect, know what it is to be "undocumented." To be without documents is to be without citizenship. To be without documents is to carry the title, "illegal," with all the legal and emotional vulnerability that confers. Documents matter.

A marriage license is, in a sense, but one more piece of paper issued by the state. In the rebellious days of the sixties young people scoffed at the need for this piece of paper, how could certification by the state be important in the face of the loving commitment of two people? How ironic, and how much things have changed, that now the most radical among us make the obtaining of a marriage license a mark of prophetic witness while the most traditional among us seek to withhold it! But is it just one more piece of bureaucratic paper? Is it not the one, last remaining tangible symbol of citizenship we are yet able to withhold from some among us? Is this really all about clinging to what the Bible says about marriage? (And friends, go down that path, particularly in the Old Testament, and believe me, you end up in some very strange places!) Or is it yet one more example of our deep historical ambivalence over the stranger in our midst, and of our reluctance to extend citizenship? Could it be that the great marriage debate which roils the political and ecclesiastical waves today is as much about citizenship as it is about what the Bible may or may not say about homosexuality and marriage?

Justice and peace in the Middle East may seem a long way, geographically and conceptually, from marriage debates. Yet it, too, is about citizenship. At the heart of the question is the symbol of a wall, welcome security for some, an excluding and alienating kind of prison for others. For Jews there is the painful historical memory of loss of citizenship in Europe, for Arabs, the loss of citizenship in Palestine. Jews carry the memory of life as forced citizens of the death camps; Palestinians live today as residents of occupied territories, a refugee existence - undocumented, alien, not a people. For Jews there is desire to defend a state, a determined clinging to a prized and historically contested homeland. For Palestinians the mourning of a lost state, and the yearning for a homeland. For each there is a contested capital, Jerusalem. The stories are the same, yet they are also different. For Jews citizenship, even the availability of citizenship in a homeland called Israel, is a response to the assault on citizenship that reached its peak in the holocaust where legal citizenship documents were replaced by a cloth star. But that assault was only the final experience of anti-Semitic pogroms that marked the long history of Christian Europe that alternately welcomed and then expelled this stranger in their midst. For Arabs, Christian and Muslim, the possibility of citizenship in a place, a state called Palestine, is a response to the disgrace of military defeat, the loss of villages and homes and olive trees, the daily humiliation of having papers checked by hostile Israeli security forces who are, in fact, little more than border guards determining, often in the most capricious manner, which powerless Palestinian is to be granted some of the rights of citizenship. It is about being forced to live as aliens and strangers in a place called home.

We in the United Church of Christ have always affirmed the right of Jews to citizenship in a homeland marked by safe and secure borders. That is not subject to debate. We have even said that God's covenant with the Jews, their citizenship in the commonwealth of God's promise made to Abraham and Sarah, remains intact, inviolate, that it has not been superseded by the covenant we know in Christ. On this matter, too, we will not debate this summer. But we have also said that the denial of citizenship to Palestinians is an outrage that cannot be tolerated, a denial that, in the end, threatens the citizenship of all in the Middle East. To experience the crossings, even as secure Americans with passports, to see the assault on the dignity of elders by brash young security forces no doubt using arrogance to hide their own frustration and fear, is to feel the humiliation of those denied citizenship. To watch with Palestinians the security wall being constructed, dividing them from their ancestral homes and olive groves, depriving them of access to work and schools, is to feel the humiliation of the undocumented. To see enormous Jewish settlements relentlessly encroaching into the Occupied Territories is to feel the rage of citizens turned into subjects. To walk through Beirut's Sabra and Shatilla camps where Palestinians have been pent up for fifty years, as in the camps in Gaza, unwanted by the world, is to sense the despair of citizens turned refugees; indeed it is to see a cauldron where citizens are lured into terrorism and the violence that threatens every innocent citizen, Israeli and Arab alike. And to know that all of this is bankrolled by huge amounts of American foreign aid is to be challenged in our own responsibilities of citizenship.

The debates we will have two weeks from today in Atlanta, debates about marriage, debates about the Middle East, will test our not only our view of particular Biblical texts and theological traditions, but our understanding of citizenship which is, itself, at the heart of Christian mission. Mission matters not just because of the things we do to educate or to heal, to nurture churches or to confront injustice. It is compassion and it is justice but it is more than that. It is nothing less than a witness to the mission of God, a great historical sending of God's own self into the world to bless it and to redeem it. Mission is sending, the sending of Christ - born homeless, joining his family in Egypt as a refugee, a Jewish subject of the Roman empire, a criminal executed outside the gates - the sending of one who continues and completes the trajectory of blessing that begins with the call of Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing to the nations, the bringing of slaves to a homeland, and the return of exiles to their forsaken capital. The story of "not a people" who become "God's own people." God's extravagant welcome is nothing less than the breaking down of the wall of hostility, of reaching those who are near and those who are far off and making them one, no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens, members of the household of God.

The decisions we will make at Synod will not be easy. God's extravagant welcome asks us to extend citizenship, not simply to offer pleasant hospitality. Extending citizenship does not easily translate into clear public or church policies about marriage and family life, or to clarity about how to use the church's economic leverage most effectively and fairly to promote justice and peace in the Middle East. Some in the United Church of Christ are already telling us that extending citizenship in the form of marriage licenses to gay and lesbian persons will render them exiles from their own church. Jewish friends are warning us that to divest from companies doing business in the Occupied Territories for the sake of the citizenship of Palestinians is to deny the sense of shared citizenship we have struggled so hard to achieve following centuries of anti-Semitic violence and the unique and still almost incomprehensible horrors of the Holocaust. Whatever prophetic word the Synod may offer will need to be accompanied by pastoral grace. Discipleship is costly, even as it is joyful, and we will need to carefully weigh the cost - all the costs - for there will be costs no matter how we decide, and the bearing of them is not always equal.

So I am comforted by my Puritan forebears who struggled with these questions in the context of baptism, and found a way to extend citizenship, even if it was only "half-way," marking out a trajectory toward a welcome others would one day be able to offer more fully. And I am encouraged by others in the global Christian family who, in their own context, struggle with us. Among the many visits in India in February was one to a declining industrial city called Durgapur, as a guest of a diocese of the Church of North India. We were there to dedicate a "Peace Center," a conference center that your gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission built, a center that will be a place for women to be empowered, for laborers to confront the increasing violence provoked by job loss, for religious groups often in deep conflict to enter into dialogue, for the region's tribal communities to claim their identity and their dignity amid the Bengali majority culture. In a place of deep divisions, the Peace Center is conceived by the bishop as the focus of renewal

for his diocese, a mission center living the mission of God that seeks to extend citizenship among those who are alienated and strangers. As we gathered for the huge worship service the tribal women - members of an old surviving indigenous culture that yet remains outside the dominant culture, people known as "scheduled classes" in the constitution because they only find themselves in the constitution as part of an appended "schedule," welcomed me and others as honored guests by washing our feet, a sign of hospitality offered in indigenous cultures around the world since the time of Jesus and before. Yet even here, even amid the marvelous vision of the Peace Center, even in the festival of music and dance that followed incorporating tribal animist traditions and Hindu epics, even here there was something "half way." As I preached to a huge crowd I saw the Bengali sitting toward the center, toward the front, while the tribal people, outside even the rigid caste system, stayed toward the back, or watched through the open windows. Even this partnership between a visionary bishop and the United Church of Christ seeking to extend citizenship bore the reminder that we are often, even at our very best, only half way.

Leviticus may seem an odd place to find a text for us to meditate on in these challenging times of costly decision and discipleship around the demands of citizenship that are the living out of the mandates of extravagant welcome. At the very least there may be a sense of delicious irony! Yet tucked in the midst of admonitions about witchcraft and making daughters prostitutes and respecting the elderly and being honest in the use weights and measures in commerce, comes this word: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19.33-34). Extending citizenship. A challenging vocation for us as Americans, for us as Christians. It is never something we do comfortably. Sometimes we can only go "half way," disappointing to some, an important milestone on a journey yet to be completed for others. Yet it is the very mission of God who is always making "not a people," "God's people." And it is the legacy of our forebears who struggled as we do today, who in the end, found in the Scriptures a God "who is very tender of his grace, who delighteth to manifest and magnify the riches of it, and cannot endure any straightening or eclipsing thereof."