

Sermon: God's Generous Welcome
Rev Dr Ana Gobledale
Romans 12:2-5, Matthew 25:31-40
Loveland United Church of Christ, Nov 19 2023

God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Open our ears and hearts this morning to the interpretation of your word that we may be united as community and empowered for our journey in life.

I stand out like a sore thumb. I hear the celebration music. Drums mark the beat. I see women gather in their island groups, their dresses colour-co-ordinated! But, where do I fit in? I feel as though I am an excluded outsider.

Let me begin at the beginning. I spent a week in Vanuatu at the request of the Vanuatu Church of Christ, a partner church. Vanuatu, what did I know of Vanuatu? Not much. Not until someone told me I was going to the New Hebrides did I have a clue where I was being asked to go! Has anyone here been there? Does anyone know where Vanuatu is? [It's an island in the Pacific Ocean between Australia and Fiji.]

Remember the musical "South Pacific" and the song *Bali Hai*? Well, James Michener's island of "Bali Hai" is the island of Ambae, one of the many islands that make up the Vanuatu nation and my destination.

Vanuatu is another world, it seems. I have a long flight from Australia to the main island. Then, to reach the smaller island of Ambae, I have two more flights in a tiny "islander." And I mean tiny! I sit right behind the pilot and have a grand view out the cockpit windows! No locked door to the cockpit in this plane! I see the volcano-coned islands emerging from the emerald seas—their lush green slopes quite a contrast to the dry tan Colorado foothills. My little plane swoops down toward the coastline of Ambae. I pick out the airstrip in front of us, a narrow blaze of brown-earth between walls of green. As we approach, I realize, to my horror, the airstrip runs uphill! My stomach lurches. It appears we will plow straight into the steep hillside. But at the last moment the pilot, skillfully, pulls up and we touchdown neatly, barreling UP the runway, stopping—finally—what feels like inches from the jungle's edge. As we taxi to the little shack of an airport, my lunch resettles in my stomach, and I realize just how far away I am from anything I have ever known.

When the hatch opens, the warmth and humidity hit me like a steam bath. I quickly acquire that shiny island look, a sheen of perspiration all over. My host meets me at the airport, a shed, really, and loads me and others who have arrived for the conference into his pick-up truck. We bounce to the community, Ndui ndui. I will not see another non-Islander until I return to the main island in 6 days' time.

I am in Vanuatu, invited to be keynote speaker, Bible Study leader and preacher at a Christian Women's Fellowship gathering. I have been under the impression that this is their **annual** meeting...no big deal, yet a wonderful opportunity for me to share with other Christian women in a place I have never been before. When my host hands me a formal printed invitation, which I had not seen before, I learn that this is not merely an annual event, but FIRST national gathering of its kind since 1942 when Christian Women's Fellowship started in Vanuatu. The truck bumps under several banners stretched across the road that proclaim, "Welcome to the Silver-Golden Jubilee of Christian Womens Fellowship!" Silver-Golden: I realize we are at year 64, but who is counting?

Five days pass on the island. We have had a wonderful week--1000 women from more than a dozen islands gathered for worship, study and conversation.

This is my last day on Ambae. As on all the other days I have arisen at 4:15 with the sun. I have fetched my bucket of water and walked through the jungle to the wash-place – a walled cement slab with a drop toilet on one side and a “shower room” on the other.

After my “shower,”-- water splashed over me from my bucket-- I have donned the last of my clean dress. It was suggested that I pack each day’s outfit in a separate zip-lock plastic bag to keep them clean, and even more importantly, dry, in this very damp place. Each morning, I have unzipped a fresh freezer bag and removed that day’s clothes. At the end of each day, I have been very glad to have those re-seal-able bags, into which I deposit the day’s outfit, with its sweaty accumulation of my wonderful aroma. I zip that freezer bag closed!

Today wearing my last clean outfit, I walk through the oppressive heat to the dining area and enjoy the breakfast of fresh bread, pineapple, tea and conversation – a blend of English, Bislama and a bit of Ambae I have learned during the week.

As I mentioned, each day the women of the different islands wear colour-coordinated dresses. Today everyone from Pentekost Island looks gorgeous in green. The women of Port Vila glow in hot pink. Santo women wear blue. Already, we all are covered with a thick sheen of perspiration. The heat and humidity hang heavily on us. Only 9:00 in the morning, and I feel ready for another cool bucket of water over my head, and a fresh outfit, but... I have no more clean outfits.

I am beckoned by my hosts to gather with the West Ambae women. There is to be a “parade” through the village and I am to be part of their delegation. We gather in the shade of a spreading frangipani tree awaiting the big parade’s start. Today everyone of the West Ambae community is dressed in matching canary-yellow dresses. Everyone, that is, except for me. My dress, my last dress, is dark, dark blue. I stand out like a bruised thumb. I feel sooo different. Where do I, the outsider, fit in? All the canary yellows and me, the one blue, are called to pose for photos...I am to be immortalized as the outsider.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, provides a helpful image to aid our understanding of community. In our reading today, to what does Paul compare the church? [*a body*]. Paul uses the body-image in more than one of his letters: the body has different parts with various functions, but it works best as a whole, nothing left out. Church and community work best as a whole-- no part, no one, left out. Everybody, every member, filling their role.

Yet, we live in a world where exclusion, leaving people out, seems to be the norm. Have you ever felt left out? Why? We leave people out for all sorts of reasons: colour, culture, language, age—too young, too old; sexual orientation -- being homosexual or Transgender; abilities, different abilities, illnesses, different religious beliefs: Any other reasons for exclusion come to mind? [*Homelessness, being foreign, accents*]. The church, through the ages, right down to today, has not been innocent of exclusivity. How easy it is to be blind to those around us, those outsiders, alone, adrift. Even if we see someone, how easy it is to ignore them and leave them out. Worse, to judge and condemn others because they are different or are doing life differently.

God invites us to resist our nature, to be radical in our welcome, to open our arms and hearts and minds to welcome the stranger, the marginalized, the one who is different from us. I feel like I’m preaching to the choir here at First Congregational. Being truly hospitable means making it easy for everyone who feels adrift to find a mooring and safe harbor. To help everyone who feels like an outsider feel like a member of the group, the body, a member of the family. We are called to love the “other” as our own son or daughter, mother, father, brother, sister.

Back at West Ambae, in Vanuatu, as we gather before the cameras, I wonder, where do I fit in? All the canary yellows and me, the outsider, the non-islander, in blue, posing for a photograph...When Evelyn, one of the women with whom I have been staying, turns to me and says, "Ana, you look excluded. I want you included." These are her exact words! She starts plotting something with other women, their heads leaning together in a conspiratorial pose.

"Come with me," she takes my hand and leads me, rapidly, away from the parade route. As we enter a dorm room, Evelyn explains, "Leah has a yellow dress for you." She rummages through a bag and pulls out a bright canary yellow dress! "Quick! Put it on!" I pull off my blue dress, already smelling quite used, and slip the yellow one over my head.

As I take my next breath ... I almost gasp. My eyes bulge. I realize Leah must have worn this dress all day yesterday! But today it is mine. I catch my breath before we dash back to join the canary yellows in the parade! They slide me into position in the midst of the group, about 80 strong. Though I am clearly not an islander, I virtually disappear. I blend in. I am no longer an outsider. There is room on their path for me, a place in their community. They have, as Christ's disciples, welcomed me in. What greater gift could Evelyn, and the others, have given to me than to include me --white, Western, foreign. To find a way to dissolve my differences. To say, "You are a member of our family, a member of God's family. Walk with us. We welcome you!"

God reaches out to us with a radical welcome. We in turn are called upon to reach out to others with that same generous welcome. I am reminded of that saying, "No man--no person-- is an island." No one adrift and alone. Here, amongst the islands of Vanuatu, I am reminded of how easy it is to be disconnected, to feel like a castaway, to feel 'other'. BUT our Christian faith calls us to be interconnected, inclusive and including, just as Evelyn has included me. No longer do I stand out like a sore thumb. No longer am I excluded. No longer do I wonder where I fit in. I have been welcomed into the community, as a full member of the Body of Christ.

Pray with me. God, thank you for loving us, for extending to each one of us your generous welcome. Thank you for First Congregational Church here in Loveland that work so hard to live out that welcome. Thank you for giving each of us an important role as members of the body, for connecting us as family, as community, around the world, even with the people of Vanuatu, Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, Russia, Mexico and here at home in Colorado. Help us work at community, offering radical hospitality to those who come into our church, into our homes, into our nation, into our lives. In Christ's name, and as his disciples we pray. Amen.