

Paul said that, as Christians, we are many members, but we are one body in Christ (Romans 12:4), *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

When asked which was the greatest commandment, Jesus says: (Mark 12:31) *The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength,’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

And in Matthew. 7:1-2, Jesus says: *‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.’*

(Luke 18:9-14) *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

We are called by Christ’s example, to proclaim release to the captives and set at liberty the oppressed (Luke 4:18); *‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’*

One of the most important things we do each Sunday morning is to say “welcome” in various ways. It’s important to know just what we are welcoming people to. We are not saying welcome because we just want bigger numbers or more money. We are not saying welcome because we want people to join us like they might join a country club. We are saying welcome because we are inviting people to join us in following Christ and doing God’s bidding. We are saying welcome because we have a mission to do and we invite others to join us in this important work. So, how do we say welcome?

1) We welcome everyone! All the reasons we might not choose to spend time with someone is irrelevant at church, because we are on a mission. Saying welcome requires that we pay attention. We notice people and their needs. We notice their children. When Allison was little, she always was aware when people just spoke to me and ignored her. We welcome the children.

2) We greet everyone! Greeters and church secretaries are two of the most important tasks of anyone in the church. Often, they are the first contact with visitors trying to discover if we are a good fit for them. That’s why I’m delighted that we have a wonderful church secretary in Alice and that people are signing up to stand and greet and make people feel welcomed. We use our church time to make sure that visitors are talked to and our closest friends are neglected until later. No new person should be standing alone if we are saying welcoming adequately. We say

welcome through our website. Many folks find us there, and so we try to convey who we are and what we believe and that here all are welcome!

3) We pay attention to special needs such as walkers, wheelchairs. I've learned so much from having Chloe as a member. Because of her, I am asking myself every week if what I say to the children is accessible to a child who can not see. Because of Christina, I think about those who may not be able to hear out of one or both ears. She had meningitis as a child and is deaf in one ear. I no longer assume people are ignoring me if they don't immediately hear what I'm saying.

4) We welcome people who think and believe differently than we do. One of my mentors, Dan Romero, use to say that the UCC is a broad umbrella with people racially, ethnically, and especially theologically different underneath. The real question is whether the people choose to stand with us under the umbrella. Dan often said that one of the great challenges of the UCC was whether we could accept theological diversity: people who are more conservative in their beliefs or people who are more liberal. Its not whether we believe just alike; it's whether we choose to join together in service to God and to God's world.

We all want a sense of belonging within the important communities of our lives especially the church. How we say 'welcome' may give people a sense that it is here they belong. Now I've asked Jim to share how he has discovered ways to say 'welcome.'