

Welcome Home
by Rev Durrell Watkins
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I battle weight...though lately I have not so much battled weight as I have formed an alliance with it. I've looked into the eyes of Prime Minister Cheesecake, and I've seen his soul. I'll spend three months losing 15 or 20 pounds, and then three weeks gaining it all back. It's OK; I'm not depressed...except when I'm dieting. I just love food. And strangely, exercise doesn't come as naturally to me as snacking does. And about half my family members are given to corpulence...so it's genetic, right? These factors all conspire against me to make sure my weight exceeds 200 lbs more often than not. So when I talk about God's feast, or the Banquet of Love, or having room at the Table...I speak with authority, conviction, and with the voice of experience.

Sophie Tucker, herself not a small person, is my role-model...she claimed and celebrated her girth and insisted that she was in fact the last of the Red Hot Mamas. She would even say, "The one thing I've noticed girls, and you can store this under your domes – the married men who follow me around have skinny wives at home." If you can't fix it, feature it. Sophie was very good at that.

Well, I want to talk a little this morning about the welcome feast, the love feast...it isn't fattening, and in truth, you can't over indulge. It was that great old saint of our faith tradition, Auntie Mame who wisely said, "Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death." It's true...the truth of life, of divine life, is that it offers unconditional and all-inclusive welcome. We all need it, and we probably won't feel whole without it. The trick is learning that it is here for us, and taking advantage of the gift.

In 1989 I was at a Country & Western dance club in Dallas , TX . In a dark corner of a bar I walked into for the first time, I looked down at a table and there was a brochure that had been photocopied on an office copier. It was a grainy black and white copy of a tri-fold. The brochure said simply, *Homosexuality & Christianity* and on the back of it was the name and address of a church: Metropolitan Community Church (MCC).

I can't exaggerate the power of that discarded, photocopied brochure. Over the next several months I must have read that thing a hundred times. That folded up bit of paper invited me to enjoy the feast of life as the person I was. It quoted some scriptures and it referred to psychological and sociological studies, but what it really did was invite me to consider and explore the possibility that I was exactly the person I was supposed to be, and that as the person I was I had gifts to offer my world. That brochure affirmed my sacred value and in my spirit was my own magnificent...my soul magnified the goodness of life that was expressing through me. That brochure invited me to explore spirituality with a bold and radical honesty seldom found in Christian churches.

I don't know who took a brochure and bothered to photocopy it. I don't know who left it behind in a loud, smoky club. I don't know why out of the entire establishment, I happened to pause right where that brochure was. I don't know why I bothered to pick it up, and take it home, and read it over and over again. I don't know why, but I know that because I did, my life is very different than it might have been otherwise. I discovered the excitement and the freedom and the joy of exploring my spirituality. I had always had questions, but they were accompanied by guilt or fear. Now it occurred to me that the questions were more important than the answers. MY questions were part of MY quest, and this little brochure let me know there was a place for me and my questions and my quest, and that offered me such hope and such empowerment and such validation that the genie has never been put back in the bottle. I resonated with Paul's statement to the Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free." For the first time, I associated religion with freedom, which is what salvation now means to me.

Later, as a member of a Metropolitan Community Church, I would hear a minister on the staff or our church pray during worship. Rev. Carol West was a charming and winsome person who prayed beautifully. And I noticed in the early nineties that she would always conclude her prayers by saying, "And as always, we pray for a cure for AIDS." That was amazing to me. We did multiple funerals every week for people with AIDS in those days. Urban life was a battle field and wounded soldiers were dropping in our midst every day. Medicine was not yet offering much hope, and most churches were either ignoring the AIDS crisis, or daring to call it divine punishment on particular groups of people. But in the church that I found through a discarded brochure, a charming woman would stand in front of a packed house and very gently say, "we pray for a cure for AIDS."

Having HIV/AIDS didn't exclude one from our church. In fact, we brought the virus right into our public prayers. That felt so welcoming. That felt so encouraging. That felt so comforting. Just to know there was a church that would stand with you without judgment, that would dare to hope against hope that things could get better – even as they seemed to be getting worse. There was a place that celebrated, not merely tolerated, not ignored, not condemned, but celebrated the gay man, the lesbian, the bisexual, the transgender person, the non-homophobic heterosexual, the skeptic, the interfaith couple, the person with AIDS. There really was a spiritual home for all people, and that seemed new and exciting and miraculous to me.

I've been part of MCC for 17 years this month...almost my entire adult life. I've been part of churches with as many as 2000 members, and with as few as 50; I've worshiped in churches in sleepy, suburban bedroom communities and in bustling urban metropolises. And in each of these wonderful places, people would find their way home. Aching from a divorce, abandoned by their parents, or by their children, angry at their former churches, lonely or scared or searching or curious, fighting for their dignity or for their lives as our friends in Jamaica are doing...they would come in and find SOMETHING that proved to be a lifeline. I believe that something can be called "Welcome." What people continue to find in our churches is a place that doesn't condemn them for where their journeys may have taken them, but that instead says to them, "Where've you been? Welcome home!"

By calling ourselves progressive here at the Sunshine Cathedral, we mean that we are spiritual seekers who understand our Ritual Communion Meal to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all people. By allowing people to come home, to be who they are, to love them just as they are and to pray for them and with them just as they are...that's healing. That's miraculous. That's why we are here...to affirm YOUR sacred value, to say whether this is your first time here or your thousandth time here...WELCOME HOME!

In chapter 55 of Isaiah's prophecy, that welcome is made quite explicit. We heard the first few verses earlier this morning, but let's listen to a bit more of that text. Hear these words of Isaiah 55, and hear them as if they are the word of God directed at you as the people of God...hear these words as if they were meant to affirm and bless you...hear these words as if they were intended to fill you with hope and joy, because I believe that is exactly what they are. Isaiah 55 reads:

ALL you who are thirsty, come to the water! You have no money? Come, receive grain and eat. Come...drink wine and milk. Why spend your money for something that doesn't build you up? Why give your wages for what doesn't satisfy? Listen to me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Come to me...I will renew with you the everlasting covenant...Seek our God who may still be found, call on God who is near...Turn to God for mercy...for just as the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it rich and fruitful, giving seed to those who sow and bread to those who eat, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my bidding, achieving the end for which I sent it. YES – in Joy you will depart, in peace you will be brought back; Mountains and hills will break out in song before YOU, and all the trees of the countryside will clap their hands for you.

That's the message of Isaiah 55. ALL...COME...GO OUT WITH JOY...RETURN WITH PEACE...BECAUSE THE WHOLE UNIVERSE CELEBRATES YOU. That's what a contributor to Isaiah's prophecy believed. It's what Jesus believed. I hope it is something that you will at least consider.

The Feast of Love is prepared for YOU...no matter what you believe, no matter who you are, no matter where you've been...the grace represented at this table never runs out and it is never withheld from anyone. Even if you don't want the bread or the wine, the love that those elements represent still enfolds you and that divine love celebrates the beauty and the goodness that you are. Just as you are, you are the reason we celebrate today. Hear the Word of God saying today, 'Welcome Home'...This is the Good News. Amen.

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AFFIRMATION

Just as I am...

I drink from God's fountain.

Just as I am...

I feast at God's table.

Just as I am...

I know that I am home.

Just as I am...

I am loving, lovable, and loved.

Just as I am...

I am blessed.

And so it is!