

**Dear Friends,**

Last week, Judge Stephen Aldrich preached about 'Extravagant Welcome.' He did this as Kristin Wharton, Neil Pederson, and I were training to facilitate, "Our Whole Lives!" Being an Open & Affirming church, we just can't say, "Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" and then those who are outside of society's norm educate us about who they are. We have to educate ourselves so we can treat each person with love and respect. Just like anything else, we were told that once the curriculum is printed, it becomes out of date, because our society and definitions are changing faster than academia, politics, and publishing can keep up. So we have to keep learning if we want to be welcoming to any and all in our community.

Pronouns are a big thing for people in their 30's and maybe a little younger, but now it seems more and more youth and young people are forgoing any definition or identity at all, just wanting to be acknowledged as a person, not a male or female or non-binary or lesbian or gay or queer or transgender or asexual or two-spirit. They will love who they love and act how they act, without all the labels that we, as humans, like to throw at people so we can categorize them and then 'know' all about them.

Paul, in Galatians, wrote, "In Christ, there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, rich nor poor." Christian was the only label they needed. It is hard to not put a label on most people because our brain tries to sort out people and our society and world also tries to place barriers against one another. Our job then, is to put the labels aside and see who whole person before us. Their gifts, their hopes, their joys and sorrows, and their stories. This takes effort and time and compassion and love.

May we continue to grow in our vision to see the unique child of God who comes into our door, whether it is the first time or one-thousandth.

Peace