shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling” (26:1-2). Take a portion of your harvest to the place of worship. If you show up with an offering, you will be welcomed. Pariser says that *welcome* is the foundational layer, the level where you ask the questions, “Do I feel I belong here? Do I feel I’m invited here? Do I feel safe here?” According to Moses, if you take an offering to the place of worship, the answer to all three questions is “yes.”

Next, says Moses, **CONNECT** with the priest and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us” (26:3). Meet the priest, *connect* with him, tell him where you are coming from, and give him your offering. This person-to-person connection is critically important.

Once welcomed and connected, you will begin to **UNDERSTAND**. You will say to God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien…then he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly…we cried to the LORD…the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand” (26:4-8). This sacred Passover story continues to inspire people to trust in God’s power and focus on justice for the oppressed. This liberation story unites the people of Israel. People make meaning together by finding common ground. *Understanding* comes from a shared story.

Lastly, you **ACT**. After giving your offering, Moses says “*celebrate* with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house” (26:11). *Acts* of generosity and celebration are always inclusive, not exclusive. A safe, welcoming space includes as many people as possible. “Humanity moves forward,” says Pariser, “when we find new ways to rely on and understand and trust each other.” Moses knew this long before the invention of social media, which is why he gave the people of Israel new ways to be and act*.*

What we are talking about here, in a word, is civility. Civility is a politeness and courtesy in our behavior or speech. Civility is treating each person with respect. Civility is making others feel included. Civility is listening more than speaking. Civility is acting for the common good. Civility is looking to the other person’s needs and feelings first. Our world needs civility more now than ever! As our words and actions escalate, we need more civility. The key to civility is to *welcome, connect, understand,* and *act*.

As we create safe spaces, civil spaces, the first step is always **welcome***.* Members of a church need to be more than friendly; we need to be truly welcoming. Unfortunately, we often go to church with the attitude of a guest, not a host. As guests, we focus on having a good time, to be entertained. We enter the church and look for our friends. We sit where we like with little regard to making room for others. We listen to the church’s music and decide whether we enjoy it or not. As a guest I am a consumer, concerned about my personal comfort, because as a guest the experience is all about me.

Being a host is something very different. As a host we focus on serving others. We greet guests at the door and try to connect them with people they would enjoy. We make room for others at the table and save seats for them which helps them fit in well. We pick church music that our guests would like, even if it is not our favorite. As hosts, we are concerned about the comfort of others, because the experience is all about them. Churches must constantly challenge themselves to be hosts, welcoming others.

Do you remember the first time you walked through the church door? For some of you, this has been your church family since you were born. Others of you came to our congregation more recently. It makes no difference when you started, you found welcome here. If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t have stayed! This is your space, and part of your task as a member is to make this a welcoming space for others. The apostle Paul reminds us that “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (Romans 10:12). All people are welcome here.

Church should be a place to **connect**. Remember Moses’ words about bringing an offering to church? Each of you brings something to offer. Maybe it’s money. Maybe it’s time to help with a mission project. Maybe it’s an open mind to learn something new about God or faith. Maybe it’s a heart of compassion to mentor kids. Maybe it’s a new idea our congregation needs to consider. Maybe it’s an awareness of someone in the community who needs our help. Maybe it’s listening to someone who needs to share. Maybe it’s something you’ve not yet identified in yourself. Whatever you bring, sharing your offering makes life-giving connections. What you willingly offer makes our fellowship better. Your offering also reminds us that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Church is where we begin to **understand** our place in God’s kingdom. Bible stories help us to make meaning together. They teach us who we are, as well as *whose* we are. Whether the story is God liberating the Israelites or Jesus calling the first disciples, we begin to understand that we are part of God’s sacred story. The sermon, Sunday school lessons and Confirmation classes deepen our understanding of how God wants to free us from all kinds of captivity, and how Jesus calls us to follow him in faith. The story of God’s saving work began in the distant past, but it continues today, and we are part of it.

You’ve spent the last few years preparing, studying scripture, asking questions, learning about faith, our congregation, and its mission. At the most basic level, what we hope you understand is “that Jesus is Lord,” as Paul says, and that you “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead” so that you will be saved (Romans 10:9). Last week you met with the Deacons & Elders, and they determined that you do *understand* this truth, and that you understand what is required of you as a member of our congregation.

Which brings us to the final quality: **act**. When we gain an understanding that we *are* God’s people, we naturally want to *behave* like God’s people. This means that we act in new and different ways. Instead of destroying our enemies, we try to love them. Rather than cursing those who hate us, we pray for them. Instead of plotting revenge, we work on forgiveness. Instead of hoarding our resources, we share them. We do this not because we are suddenly good and noble people, but because our actions are shaped by Jesus, the one who loves us, prays for us, forgives us, and generously shares with us.

In a few minutes you will make a profession of faith. You will stand before this congregation and declare that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, and that you intend to be his disciple. That means you intend to live as he did, loving your enemies, feeding the hungry, tending to the sick, and sharing the good news of God’s love for all people. This is vitally important work in a world that is breaking apart at the seams. The simple things you do to *welcome, connect, understand,*and*act* with and for others, will make all the difference in this world. In a world of chaos, let’s create a nurturing space for people to gather and grow. Let’s be a church to be proud of by *welcoming, connecting, understanding,*and*acting.*

Prayer: Lord, You send out Your Spirit to touch the hearts of all people, so that they may believe in You and in Jesus whom You sent. Look kindly on these young men and women as they listen to Your voice. Open their hearts to Your Spirit and bring to fulfilment the good work that You have begun in them. Make each of us an instrument of Your love. Teach us to appreciate what is holy in others, and to be patient with what we do not understand. Deepen our faith in the Gospel and help us to pass it on by our example. We pray that You will continue to guide us and sustain us. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Sources:**

* Brinton, Henry G. *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality*(Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012),25.
* Zomorodi, Manoush. “Eli Pariser: How Can We Reshape Our Digital Platforms To Be More Welcoming Spaces?” *TED Radio Hour,*July 23, 2021, www.npr.org.

**Welcome to Church**

Confirmation Sunday, March 6, 2022  [Deuteronomy 26:1-11](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+26%3a1-11&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Romans 10:8b-13

*Written for the Confirmation class of 2022*

Physical spaces have rules. Be quiet and respectful of the people around you. Turn off your phone. Be aware that people are trying to read, do research, and study. No food or drink allowed. These are the rules for a library. Cheer loudly for your team, stomp your feet, and clap your hands. Take selfies and post them on social media. After you see a great play, jump up and down, and high-five the people around you. Eat and drink all you want; just don’t spill it on the person in front of you. These are the rules for a sports stadium. You would never confuse the two! If you follow stadium rules in a library, you will be forcibly removed. If you apply library rules in a stadium, people will wonder what is wrong with you. You will get some dirty looks if you tell the sports fans around you to be quiet so that you can read a book.

Libraries, stadiums, schools, medical offices, workplaces, and homes all have sets of unwritten rules. So do churches. Good, safe, nurturing physical spaces have structure. People understand and obey the rules. When the rules are not understood and followed, life becomes chaotic. Think of the online spaces we frequent. Digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Reddit do not have clearly defined rules, and so, they are chaotic. Author and entrepreneur Eli Pariser says that Twitter is like a “vast, cavernous expanse where there are people talking about sports, arguing about politics, yelling at each other, flirting, trying to get a job all in the same place with no walls, no divisions.…No wonder it’s a mess.”

The problem with social media, says Pariser, is that people do not want to follow rules. The result is digital spaces which are unwelcoming and unsafe. The online world is a dangerous place filled with cyberbullying, identity theft, offensive images, and nasty messages. Pariser believes that the helpful qualities used in public spaces can also be used to make our digital platforms healthy places: **Welcome-Connect-Understand-Act**.

The same is true in the church. Moses understood the need for rules.He instructs the people of Israel how to behave. He gives them rules for living together in the promised land. Moses creates a space where the Israelites will feel **WELCOME**. “When you have come into the land,” says Moses, “you shall take some of the first of all the fruit…and you