

“Welcome To It”

Matthew 10:40-42

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me
welcomes the one who sent me.

Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet
will receive a prophet’s reward;
and whoever welcomes a righteous person
in the name of a righteous person
will receive the reward of the righteous;
and whoever gives even a cup of cold water
to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple
—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

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I.

I might as well break the bad news to you right at the start. This will be no summer puff piece of a sermon, nor will there be any amusing personal anecdotes or stories; sorry. Instead, just a straightforward examination on the notion of “welcoming.” So it goes, sometimes.

To provide a larger context, the scripture reading set before us is to be found in the 10th chapter of Matthew. At the beginning of this chapter Jesus calls the 12 Apostles to ministry, giving them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness; with the author of Matthew then going on to individually name each of the 12. Having been called, by name, Jesus then gives the 12 their mission: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”

II.

Having been called and given their mission, Jesus then warns the Apostles about the coming persecutions: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Regarding those who would seek to do harm, Jesus goes on to reassure the Apostles, and advise them as to the virtues of being forthright: “Have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Afterwards, Jesus gives the 12 a real zinger: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” To which the Apostles must have surely said, “Huh,” along with all of us.

III.

Finally, in the last three verses of chapter 10, which is our sermon text for today, Jesus concludes his seminar on being called to discipleship, and tasked with the mission of the Kingdom of God with a few words about how rewards arise from welcome: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple —truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” 2,000 years later, these words of counsel from Jesus speak just as loudly to we who are Christ’s modern day disciples as they did to those original 12. It is incumbent upon us, then, to grasp the full measure of their meaning.

IV.

While explorations of our mission, our call to ministry, and the implicit risks in assuming these are certainly worthy pursuits, we will save those for another day. Instead, for this particular Sunday I would invite us to focus our attention on what it means to be welcoming, and to welcome others. Starting first with the original Greek found in the New Testament, the word used is δέχομαι (*dechomai*) and means to receive or to accept. This is translated as “welcome” in our text, which comes from the Old English word “wilcumian” and has two elements: “wil-” which indicates desire or pleasure and “Cuman” which means come. So, “welcome” has always meant “it is good you have come,” in the sense of a welcome guest. Most commonly, we associate the notion of welcoming with hospitality: to be helpful, supportive, and accommodating of another, to make someone feel at home. Particularly, and most virtuously, the stranger.

V.

In such an understanding, the notion of welcoming is an arrow running in one direction: from the host to the guest. As in offering a gift to another, *we* give and the *other* receives. Said another way, it is good (for you, in your life) that you have come (to me). Over the past quarter century, I have witnessed *countless* examples where people have been welcomed at, and into, the Church on the Park, and made to feel at home here/there. This is most easily seen in

folks who are very far away from their own home and family like Abhi from India; before her, Jorge from Angola; before him, Pierre for Cameron; and before him, Aggrey from Kenya. However, one does not need to be an international student to receive, or need, such a welcome, as everyone who walks into a church has come because they are looking for a home. Either a home away from home, or a home within their home. We all want, and need, to belong to something bigger. To be part of a caring community, for however long or short a duration.

VI.

While the understanding of welcome as hospitably is good and true and an important aspect of living in community with others, what we often miss is that the arrow of welcoming runs the other way as well: from guest to host. Said another way, it is good (for me, in my life) that you have come (to share your life, and yourself, with me). When we welcome people we not only give a gift to them in *their* lives, we also give a gift to ourselves in our *own* lives. Talk to anyone who has been a foster-parent, adopted a child (as I have), hosted a fresh-air kid or Exchange Student, shared the holidays or a meal with those who are widows or widowers or far from their own family, taught a young person how to fish, knit, work with their hands, use a tool, or simply took the time to listen to someone speak of their life, and they will tell you they received far more than they gave.

VII.

While others certainly gain a great benefit from being welcomed, and while it is true it makes us *feel* good inside to help and host others, the greater truth is we, ourselves, become better and our lives are made all the richer for making the effort (and it *can* be an effort) to engage in the experience of welcoming others. Often, when people consider the life of faith, they see a path filled with hard decisions, great sacrifice, and the labor of discipleship. Quite often this does turn out to be the case, especially as our faith matures and deepens. However, with regard to being welcoming of others, doing so is almost always the smart play, the obvious right thing to do, the best course of action to take and the wisest decision we can make for *ourselves*. Being welcoming of others is the lowest hanging fruit we can gather to feed ourselves; often at eye-level right there in front of us, our easiest and most obvious reward.

VIII.

That said, being welcoming of others is not without its challenges, though. The last thing I ever wish to do, as either a pastor or a preacher or a person, is be a pollyanna. While we should all strive to be optimists, such a perspective should always be hard-earned and, perhaps, a bit begrudgingly given. So, as a way to end today's sermon, let us talk a little bit about what can sometimes make welcoming people such a steep hill to climb.

At the start of today's sermon we heard that the root of the word "welcome" means to receive or to accept. When we receive people in our home, into our church, and into our lives, they necessarily occupy space, take time, and require energy; all of which are usually in short supply. For these reasons, welcoming should be understood as something that occurs by *degree*. It is import that we all be aware of boundaries, our own and those of others, and set them appropriately.

IX.

When there is a knock at the door, we can decide to answer it, or not. At first, if we choose, we can open the door a crack. We might even leave the safety chain attached. At some point, we might be moved to open the door completely. Some conversations, though, might best be had at the threshold, especially early on. Upon inviting some into one's home, one's life, and one's heart, interactions can certainly occur in the more common or public spaces, rather than in those private corners or behind closed doors. I draw this analogy and paint this picture not so much by way of caution, but in order to remind us that good things take time, as do deep relationships. Though it often may not feel this way, we *have* time. Let us use it wisely, and be gentle with ourselves in spending it.

X.

Welcoming people also always involves some measure of acceptance. Not just in accepting people into our lives, but in accepting the fact that others may be very different than us. The degree to which we wish, or are able, to be welcoming of others is a function of our own openness to change, as well as our willingness to *be* changed; sometimes in uncomfortable ways. Every time a new person walks into the doors of our church, for worship or for help, lives are changed. Certainly, *their* lives are changed, but I would argue that the

church, itself, undergoes an even *greater* change. Such a change is always difficult to compute because at such a point karmic and spiritual math is required. That the calculus changes, however, is never in question. It is only ever a matter of how and to what degree. Moreover, with each person who is welcomed the very nature of the church will change, over time, as the posture of welcoming seeps deeper into the fabric of congregational life. A tone is set, a habit formed, the past is released, the future is embraced.

XI.

Finally, I would like to share with you that I would not, or could not, have written this sermon 27 years ago. Though I had an inkling, then, of what I know, now, with certainty, it has taken the past quarter of a century to fully recognize and embrace the mystical and transformative nature of welcoming people into one's life and one's church. There is no greater reward than that which we gain by showing hospitality to others, and by opening ourselves to the changes which come in our own lives and to our world by being welcoming of others. Welcoming is how we bring the Kingdom of God near to others and, in so doing, bring it near to ourselves. It is what the Gospel is all about, and we are welcome to it. Amen.