

June 28, 2020 Pentecost 4A
Matthew 10:34-42
Welcome

Brenda and I had an unusual experience a couple of weeks ago. We had gone up to the North Shore to hike and celebrate Brenda's birthday. We were staying up past Grand Marais, about 35 minutes from the Canadian border. We hiked High Falls Monday morning, that's an easy hike. And we had planned to hike the more challenging Devil's Kettle trail in the afternoon. We had also planned to stop at the bakery in Grand Portage and get a snack between hikes. That's where we got a surprise. We got to the turn off for Grand Portage and there was a big barricade, blocking us from entering the town, with a sign on it that said "Residents Only." They didn't want visitors in their town.

Now, part of me understood completely. They were way up on the border. The closest ICU bed was probably 150 miles in Duluth. (I learned later that the hospital in Grand Marais only has one ICU bed.) And they wanted to protect themselves from COVID-19 and stay well. I understood.

But on the other hand, it felt really strange. I wasn't welcome in their town. Even though I had money and wanted to spend it in their town, I wasn't welcome. Even though I was hungry, I wasn't welcome in their town.

I think about Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson today:

Matthew 10:40-42 "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

Jesus has 2 expectations here. One, His church will be welcomed (certainly not everywhere, all the time. We see that even in Jesus' own perfect life). And two, His church will be welcoming.

Welcome. It's such a common word. It adorns floor mats outside all sorts of entryways. It's often on road signs as one enters a new state, a new town. There are places where people offer "welcome" as a greeting as I enter:

"Welcome to Wal-Mart!" "Good evening and welcome-table for two?" "Welcome to the greatest show on earth!"

Such conventional uses hide the richness of this word. Welcome. In English the word finds its roots in a compounding of "well" and "come," though with slightly different connotations that we tend to use today. The root of "well" means something close to our current understanding of "wellness" or "well-being, and thus the word offers a kind of blessing. "Come" finds its roots in an Old English word "comer," that is, one who arrives. It is an invitation to be received into the goodness of this new place, this place here that one has just arrived.

While we use the word casually and commercially, making one welcome is not as simple as offering a word, though it often starts there. The art of making one welcome is rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality. Preparing to welcome someone takes thought, intention, discipline. Some practitioners of hospitality are masters of the art; they're always ready with the accoutrements of welcome: an appropriate beverage, food, a comfortable chair, a few thoughtful and respectful questions of the "comer." Their very presence seems to wipe away the strangeness or awkwardness of social greeting and make one feel as if they are home.

St. Matthew's staff has benefited from people like this. Our former office manager, Ruth Petersen, has a sister and brother-in-law, Suzy and Todd who excel at hospitality. They have a lake home up by Alexandria that they offer to us for our staff retreats. And they truly love being able to do that. When Ruth retired, Suzy made a point to give me my own key and made sure I knew that they wanted us to keep using her lake home even though Ruth was no longer part of the staff.

And St. Matthew has reflected that kind of hospitality. Over the years, we have offered our space to Sudanese, Liberians, Tibetans, a different group of Liberians and Ecuadorians.

If you've ever been the recipient of such hospitality, you know exactly what I mean. If you are such a master practitioner of hospitality, please know that those of us who have received it notice, and we thank you.

Perhaps the measure of true welcome is the ability of the host to make the guest feel at home. There are some places where one can go and always feel at home. It may look different. It may smell different. It may be full of strangers. But, somehow, it just feels like home, and it is good to be there.

For Jews and Christians, such hospitality has always been a part of who we are. The call to welcome the stranger is anchored in the Torah and was a part of the measure of the Hebrew community's faithfulness to God. When a traveler came to town, they waited by the well, and it was incumbent upon the townspeople to house and feed the visitor for the night.

Of course, these travelers were rarely family. These were folks unknown to the community. They were aliens, often foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, different gods.

Opening one's home was risky. Today we'd describe such a thing as out and out foolish. As Ana Maria Pineda reminds us, "Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger." But such hospitality was central to the Hebrew identity. The risk did not define the people; their hospitality did, for they knew such hospitality was central to the character of their God.

The same was true in the early Christian communities. Paul reminded the Romans to offer hospitality to the alien, and in the Letter to the Hebrews the people were reminded to show hospitality to all for in so doing some entertained angels unaware. In Acts, the early deacons practiced hospitality throughout the community, bringing welcome to those in need. And in Matthew's community, hospitality still measured the faithfulness of the people. Welcoming prophets, righteous ones and disciples (those whom Matthew called "little ones") was a disciplined practice of the young churches.

While it may seem counter-intuitive, discipline is the key to faithful hospitality. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of a nun who, although she has Alzheimer's, still asks to be rolled in her wheelchair to the door of her nursing home so she can greet every guest. Said one nun of her sister in ministry, "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to...but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life" (265). Norris continues, "I read somewhere, in an article on monastic spirituality, that only people who are basically at home, and at home in themselves, can offer hospitality...hospitality has a way of breaking through our insularity" (267).

Welcome as a practice of hospitality doesn't just happen. It has to be taught. And such lessons don't come easy in our society. I used to drive by a church that had a sign out front proclaiming itself to be a church where everyone is welcome, even claimed to be fully accessible for people with disabilities. It had

a lovely ramp up to the door of the sanctuary, friendly folks waiting just inside that door; but there was a step up into the building, a step to reach those people. If you're in a wheelchair, your welcome just ended. It's a matter of hospitality, and it's a matter of attention: attention to those barriers, impediments, biases, and obstacles that we construct-sometimes intentionally, though often unintentionally-barriers to the good news, to participation in the church, to abundant life in Jesus Christ.

It is noteworthy that in the Greek, the word for stranger-xenos-is also the word for guest and host. In this age of injustice and distrust and gated communities, most of us are all too aware of the term "xenophobia," or fear of the stranger. Such a fear leads to nationalism, racism and even genocide. As many scholars have noted, however, Jesus' call to welcome another is a call to xenophilia, or love of stranger, the stranger who is also guest.

It reminds of a verse at the end of the Bible, from Revelation 22:17 *The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.*

Back to Grand Portage and that barricade and "Residents only" sign. From my side of the barricade, it felt strange, excluded, unwelcome. For those on the other side of the barricade, it felt like shelter, refuge, security, protection.

The role of the church is to welcome people past the barricade and into God's refuge. We stand with the Spirit and say, "Welcome, come in. Experience the love and shelter and refreshment of God's kingdom. Welcome."

Known by **LOVE**

Live by **FAITH**

Voice of **HOPE**