

Beyond Ordinary Welcome  
Matthew 10: 37-42  
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### Prayer of Illumination

O God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your word is proclaimed, we may hear what you are saying to us today. Amen

This morning's New Testament reading is from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. In this chapter Jesus teaches the apostles what it truly means to be his disciples. This section is at the end of the chapter and has some words that sound harsh to us today, but we need to remember that Matthew is speaking to a Jewish-Christian community. There is no separate Christian church yet. So, those hearing these words would be living and worshiping with people who saw Jesus from very different perspectives. Some accepted him as the long awaited Savior, and others rejected him as the Messiah. These would be husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, cousins, and co-workers. The differences in what they believed would be enormous as they continued to live in community together.

A reading from Matthew 10:37-42

Jesus taught them saying, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;<sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.<sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.<sup>40</sup> "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.<sup>41</sup> 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; <sup>42</sup>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.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This passage is part of the Revised Common Lectionary which is the three-year cycle of weekly readings from the Bible used for preaching and worship. Typically, my initial reaction when I read what is up for the week that I am to preach is: how am I going to connect this to what is happening right now? So while this passage on discipleship and the welcome Christ calls the disciples to embrace might seem odd to us today as it feels we have been, and are continuing to say “Goodbye.” But if we remember that we are called to equip disciples to send out into the world, Christ’s instructions to the disciples here is not something out of left field. Disciples are to go out, their ministry may be to someplace else, or it may be to us, but it is not stationary, it is never passive.

Matthew draws the parallel between the behavior of Jesus and the behavior that is expected of the disciples – it is the same. Jesus is obedient, compassionate, merciful, righteous, just, and the disciples are to be the same. But we know that the disciples struggled mightily to follow in the way of Jesus, and he loved and lead them on all the same. In this we have hope, because we are called to the same behaviors, and we too fail, and Jesus is always with us, welcoming us back. He knows how hard this is. We hear it in the scripture today as he teaches the disciples what they must do, and what they must give up, and how they will suffer.

The first three verses of this passage, 37-39, are usually not included in the selection. The last verses sum up the expectations Jesus has been teaching the disciples. I find it important to read all these verses together because we see how truly hard the work is and what the disciples will face. These first verses sound alien to us today. We worry about our children and our parents, our culture has almost become myopic on the subject. We are distracted beyond belief at times by our love and sense of responsibility for these people we call family.

This section brings to mind when Jesus was first calling the disciples, and I think of Zebedee. He was on the Sea of Galilee mending nets when Jesus calls James and John, his sons, to follow him. There is Zebedee, standing in the boat with a net in his hand, watching his sons walk away with a stranger. And they never look back. The life he and his sons planned and dreamed of is gone. I know if that were me I would be yelling at them to come back, my heart would be breaking. When Jesus is talking to the disciples and says, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will find it,” I am sure they are thinking of all that they have given up, especially the people they love. They were just beginning their time with Jesus; these ordinary people that he had called, literally people off the streets, or fields or the sea. These are the people that Jesus welcomed into ministry, welcomed and invited to journey on the road with him, to spread his message. These were ordinary people whom Jesus would equip to do extraordinary things, to send them out to engage in extraordinary welcome to the world.

And that continues today. Last week Dr. Buchanan told us about some of the ordinary people who made a difference in his life. People who opened his eyes in extraordinary ways.

Welcoming the prophets among us, the righteous among us, and the little ones among us can be disconcerting. Listening to a prophet takes courage, the prophet often tells us things we do not want to hear, calls us to do things we do not want to do. And the righteous can make us feel guilty, and the little ones, those who need our welcome most, can make us feel helpless and confused. This type of welcome, the hospitality Christ calls us to offer, is not done well in isolation, joining together brings us strength. We practice here, we are equipped here in the church for the purpose of going out into the world and living as Christ's ambassadors. Sometimes that equipping is hard, and we would rather not do it, it can pull us apart from our family, divide our friendships, but it is also a time to practice the extraordinary welcome that Christ lived out, that Christ calls us to. This message is timely as we do not want to waste this opportunity for growth in Christ.

Opportunities that come our way can emerge out of experiences we dread. I will admit that I struggled with systematic theology in seminary figuring I would never get it. Out of desperation I took another missional theology class. Dr. Darryl Guder was the missional theology professor and he taught a class on Leslie Newbiggin, a pastor and missionary to India. He said that Bishop Newbiggin's success in working with the church of South India was that he never walked away, he never gave up. Dr. Guider made theology understandable for me. He would tell us that if we are to love our neighbor as Christ calls us to, "We must stay with each other, we don't give up. We stay in it and love each other even with our differences." I will admit that I drank

from the font of missional theology. Dr. Guder was a mentor for two cohorts I was part of while in seminary. He welcomed me into a new understanding. I needed a theology I could embrace, that I could live out, and this was it. Missional theology gave me the language, the vocabulary I had been searching for. This quote from Dr. Guder is one I read daily and try to live out:

*“Daily life becomes a discipline of asking how one may move more squarely into the realm of God’s reign and how one may welcome and receive it into the fabric of one’s life this day more than ever before.”*

— **Darrell L. Guder**, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*

Welcome goes with us, we move out into God’s realm. It is not a behavior we only do in a specific place. We go out and offer it to others. In the fabric of our lives we have the opportunity to provide welcome to our brothers and sisters by turning and seeing them. Welcome is practiced when we turn to the one we know is suffering, often in the most unlikely of places, like the grocery store. When we do not turn away because we are afraid we will say or do the wrong thing. We turn to them and welcome them even in silence, especially when we do not have the words. We do not leave each other at the side of the road, we are in this together.

Welcome, hospitality is what we crave during this time of transition. Reaching out, connecting and re-connecting with old and new friends, reclaiming our strong sense of call, growing in confidence to move out into the world as well equipped disciples. Knowing that we always need to come back, to be fed and nourished to go back out. Because the work is hard, but Jesus tells us the reward is great. The present reward is the action of working together in

aligning our lives with God's vision, we may not see the finished product but we faithfully hold to the belief that it will come.

This transitional time is when we all are called to welcome change, this clearing space where we can see new growth, where we can rest, just for a minute, to see what new things God is doing here. I want to acknowledge that it is probably hard to sit and listen this morning to talk of welcome after hearing that Dave has accepted another call, and as we prepare to send Nick and Kimberly off on their great adventure. I invite us to welcome them into these new ministries. To see this as a part of the mystery we are living into, and not so much as loss, but to see it as being obedient to the discipline of welcome.

We typically think of welcome or hospitality as inviting someone into our home or space, preparing it ahead of time to be inviting. That is an invitation into a space that we know well, a space in which we have control. The welcome Christ asks us to offer is out of our control, it is a welcome of vulnerability, to the unknown, the different. If we truly welcome someone, we need to step into their space, and meet them there. This takes practice. That's why there is the spiritual discipline of hospitality. We need to work at it so that it is not just about what we see is needed to make the other feel welcome. We need to lose the lives we know, lose ourselves to become alive in this kingdom work Christ calls us to.

I was given another opportunity to learn and experience welcome in seminary. At the beginning of each year there was a gathering for second (and third) career students. A senior second career student gave us the best advice about living in community. He said, "Smile and say hello to everyone you meet." I

gave it a try, and it became my habit, my discipline so to speak. Some people looked at me strange, some ignored me, but the vast majority responded positively and through this discipline I learned to not take it personally if they ignored me. It forged in me an openness that feels like welcome and hospitality. And that is a welcome that you take out. You can't practice it at home. This discipline led me to encounters and relationships with a diverse group of people, people I would never have met if I had "kept my head down and got to class." If I had just taken care of business I would have missed this much bigger world God created. I invite you all to take up this same discipline of hospitality and welcome.

There is a paradox found when our human intimate relationships are shaded with separation, by the choices we make. God calls us to be in relationship with our neighbor. And that neighbor can be abrasive, and difficult, they may not like us, or they are unknown to us. That neighbor can actually be family members who need to be welcomed back again and again. But we are still to provide welcome and hospitality.

A time of transition is exciting, and can seem a little scary. We can offer an extraordinary welcome to each other on this new journey and discover that God will make sure we have what we need. We can embrace abundance, not scarcity. The gifts that God has placed in each of us can flourish and be used as we lift our hearts to God, accepting the extraordinary welcome Christ offers, and engaging in the movement of the Holy Spirit.

And what greater reminder of that welcome that Christ offers then at this table? This table that we gather around together, where Christ feeds us. The table Christ welcomes us to again and again, never turning us away. Amen.