

Sermon – Matthew 10:40-42

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Grace Lutheran Church

4 Pentecost – Year A

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“Y’all are Welcome”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Being a Wisconsin Yankee freshly arrived in South Carolina, I was curious to experience Southern hospitality for myself. The good folks of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church did not disappoint. I arrived for my first Sunday and found a small army of Lutherans preparing for the day. A banner welcoming Erika and me was hung above the narthex door, and smells of good food, from Hoppin’ John to Lowcountry Boil, wafted from the fellowship hall. Barnie, a true Southerner, pulled me aside and told me about the pound cake that his wife, Sue, was preparing at home. In his inimitable manner, he said, with awe and reverence, “Pastor, that cake’s gonna be so good I could eat it through a screen door.” He wasn’t wrong; that cake was amazing. To be fair, the welcome we received at Grace was every bit as good, sincere, and tasty. But there’s something amazing about Southerners who take their hospitality seriously. The heritage runs strong and deep. In 1835, the northern children’s author, Jacob Abbott, commented on the poor state of taverns in the South. The taverns were in such bad shape because they simply weren’t needed. Should a gentleman be riding through Texas or Virginia or the Carolinas, he could depend upon finding a welcome at any plantation home at any time. Abbott commented, “The gentleman of the house sees his approach and is ready upon the steps. After dinner you are urged to pass the afternoon and night, and if you are a gentleman in manners and information, your host will be in reality highly gratified in your so doing.” Hospitality runs deep, but reading Abbott’s comments carefully, you’ll notice a few things.

First, a question: How many enslaved humans did the traveler ride by on his way to the plantation home? And second, the welcome would be sincere only if the guest were a gentleman (man!) of equal standing to the host.

2. Now, my point is not to berate the South, which struggles with a heritage of sin not so different from our own, even if expressed differently. My point is simply that we are all pretty good at preparing for the guests we expect or, if unexpected, the guests we perceive to be our equals or betters. As for those who are strangers or, worse, those we think of as less worthy than ourselves, well; we're not always so keen on extending welcome to them. Our ways, however, are not God's ways, which is why the biblical narrative is rife with abundant injunctions to welcome others; not simply those who are worthy, but even those we deem unworthy; in scripture, it is often widows, orphans, and aliens who are named as those especially worthy of welcome. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul reminds us – all of us – that we were once strangers and aliens, too. We were once slaves to sin but, in the grace given in Holy Baptism, we have been set free and made slaves of righteousness. To be a slave of righteousness is to live righteously, and that means welcoming others in the name of Jesus Christ, just as we have been so welcomed.
3. Jesus, at the end of a discourse detailing the challenges of discipleship, names the place where we find comfort for the journey, and that is from one another. As we follow Jesus, we find refreshment in the simple gifts of welcome and water. When we are welcomed by another, we are welcomed in the name of Jesus. And when we do the welcoming, we welcome Jesus himself, for just as is done unto the least of these, it is done unto Jesus himself. When we welcome another, we are Christ to them and discover Christ in them, too. As hard as the life of faith can be, it's really pretty simple. Welcome and water, hospitality and refreshment for all people.

4. As people of God and as the congregation of Grace Lutheran Church, this means something for our lives of discipleship, both individually and collectively. This something extends beyond simply being open to the presence of others and moving instead to a deep knowledge that we do not exist for ourselves; that the gospel of Jesus Christ is experienced in the joy of communal fellowship with one another; and that the Body of Christ is not complete without those who are not yet here. In her book, *Wide Welcome*, Jessica Krey Duckworth writes, “hope becomes tangible in those newcomers who will come and ‘be-come’ members of the congregation. In questioning the promise, newcomers are the presence of the world within the congregation. Simultaneously, newcomers are the future of the congregation and thus announce with their presence the promise of new life given to the church.” Duckworth here reminds us that hospitality, whether we are sharing a meal or the gospel itself, is not a one-way street. In extending welcome, we receive once more the promise of new life that emerges when strangers, however defined, enter into our midst.
  
5. Tangibly speaking, this means that when we gather in worship we do so with eyes and hearts open to those who are new here. If you notice someone you don’t recognize, well, say hello! Sure, maybe they’ve been members here since the days of Pastor Geiseman, but no need to be embarrassed. At least you’ll meet someone new to you! More to the point, you’ll avoid having a newcomer go unnoticed and unwelcomed, and avoid having them feel unwelcomed by God. Take time after worship to talk to those you don’t know before seeking out those you do. And remember, there is no liturgical law stating that the sharing of the peace needs to be completed in fewer than thirty seconds. Grace will not grow if our focus is on those who already belong and, much more to the point, the Body of Christ in this world will not be what God intends if we are not warm in our welcome of others. And while I am pleased at the fairly new statement of welcome in our bulletin, it is no replacement for a gracious welcome extended from one person to another,

whoever they may be. Finally, welcoming others in the name of Christ need not be restricted to Sunday morning or to what happens inside these walls. In the verses preceding today's, Jesus encourages us to live lives of bold faith, proclaiming the saving love of God from the housetops of the world. Yes, you have Jesus' permission to speak the welcoming words of the gospel any day of the week.

6. Jesus, we must always remember, did not wait for you to come to him. He knew it would never happen. No, Jesus has left the confines of heaven and come to those who would have otherwise remained estranged from God's love. While we were yet sinners and strangers, Christ died for us that we need never be alone again, that we would be forever welcome as citizens of the Kingdom of God. You, whether you're sitting in the same pew you've occupied for years or you're here for the first time, you are saved and welcomed in the unending hospitality of Christ's love. You, like Makai will be this morning, have been washed clean and made a child of God. You, whoever you are, are welcome to come into God's presence this day and receive a cup overflowing, not with water but with the very blood of Jesus, shed for you. You are welcome. And being welcomed, you are welcome to welcome others in the name of Jesus. It is together that we experience God's presence most clearly. We will soon gather at the great feast of abundant hospitality, and you don't even have to take the bread and wine through a screen door. The doors have been removed. Come on in and sit a spell, for this, with Christ and one another, is exactly where you belong. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.