

The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew the 10th Chapter

Glory to you O, Lord.

40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 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; 42 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."

The Gospel of the Lord,

Praise to you O, Christ.

It was a hot summer day at the beginning of August 2018.

My husband and I had been married about 2 and a half weeks and we were almost done packing up the truck with all of our belongings to move to Littleton, Colorado for my year of pastoral internship.

Everything was out of the town house and we were just finishing loading the bikes from the garage.

Jacob pointed to the dusty and faded welcome mat on the outside step and said, "Hey Love, can you grab the welcome mat and throw it in the truck?"

I picked up the mat, but questioned, "Do we really need to move this? Can't we just replace it once we get to Colorado?"

Jacob took the mat from my hands and put it in the truck, turning back to me, he chuckled and said,

"If we don't have a welcome mat, how will people feel welcome to our home!? And Besides, if it rains, we might want to wipe our feet before we take things inside.

And with that he patted the dust from his hands and went back in to finish cleaning.

I looked at the old mat but knew Jacob was right. We did want people to feel welcome.

Of course, I can't imagine anyone feels totally invited into a place just because the word "Welcome" is in the entryway.

But Jacob's half joke/half practical advice about the rug making a difference to our guests was pointing to his desire to be hospitable.

We were moving to a new neighborhood, and a new home where we would have to make all new friendships.

How were we going to be good neighbors?

And on the other side of that coin,

How would we be received and welcomed into our new community?

It turned out that our year in Colorado was often full of new invitations and extended welcomes. With the nature of being the intern we were invited to many people's homes and small group bible studies.

We received far more invitations than we extended, but we did manage to fit my entire 7th grade confirmation class in our living room for a movie night.

Living a life of hospitality includes how we welcome others and how we accept the welcome, the invitation that others extend.

In our gospel text today Jesus explains that extending and receiving welcome is part of discipleship.

Over the past few weeks our lectionary has been taking us through what is sometimes referred to as the "discourse on mission," in Matthew.

Jesus is preparing his disciples to go out and spread the gospel, the good news of what God is doing in world.

At the beginning of this discourse, Jesus tell the disciples that they cannot take any possessions with them, not even a second shirt to change into after a long dusty and sweaty day on the road.

These instructions made them quite vulnerable.

Jesus even calls them the "little ones" the most vulnerable in society.

They had to rely solely on the hospitality that would be offered to them for a place to sleep or even to eat.

But here in our reading for today,

Jesus reassures them that they will be taken care of and that he will be with them on their way.

Jesus says: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

The people that invite the disciples into their home are welcoming Christ and of course God too.

Those that are hospitable to the disciples are serving not only their new neighbor, but also God and the household is blessed with God's presence by hosting the disciples.

I think this hospitable exchange of welcoming and receiving hospitality was what my husband and I hoped for with our year in Colorado. We wanted to be in mutual relationship where one party isn't simply serving the other, but both can be blessed by each other.

In our tiny apartment in Colorado when I hosted my 7th grade class, I was welcoming them into my home and being a good host by making sure their popcorn bowls were always filled. But these young teenagers also welcomed me into their lives and into their stories as we were discussing the movie the Prince of Egypt and they shared how they experienced God in their lives. Their faith made my faith stronger too.

When we welcome others and receive welcome, we are encountering and sharing Christ with one another.

Now you might be thinking, this all sounds like a lovely depiction of discipleship, but how can we welcome people today when gathering people in our homes or communities is a public health risk? How can we welcome each other when there is so much conflict?

We will have to look further at how the context of our gospel passage meets our context today.

Discipleship is a difficult journey.

Last week we were reminded that the disciples are sent into a world full of conflict.

The conflict that the disciples encountered was shaped by their experience of living as poor laborers of a minority ethnic and religious group which found itself pressed under the thump of the Roman empire.

The corrupt powers exploited the poor and the “little ones;” the most vulnerable.

The relationships and society were messy.

It was not the vision that was hoped for the people of Israel, where those with resources used them to care for the whole community, especially those most in need of protection.

Today we also find ourselves living in a society where those of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are not protected by those in power. You could say they are not welcomed.

Yet we hear the call of Jesus, “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.”

For a “little one” a vulnerable disciple who didn’t take anything with them on their journey and is at the mercy of the surrounding community, a cup of cool water could be life-saving.

In these words of welcome, Jesus calls us to provide for the vulnerable in our society.

In our context today, in this global pandemic, caring for the vulnerable looks like wearing a mask wherever we go to protect each other from the virus, especially those with fragile health or underlying conditions.

Taking care of the vulnerable today even includes staying home and not inviting others over. It seems contrary to our typical ideas of hospitality, the opposite of our normal ways of giving and receiving welcome, but by keeping our distance we are showing we care. We are living into our discipleship calling.

Reading this passage in light of our world today, has challenged my previous understanding of welcome.

Welcome is perhaps more complex than a greeting in a doorway or hosting my friends.

On my discipleship journey I am continuing to learn new ways to live out the gospel and through exploring this text I have encountered new perspectives on welcome.

Jesus also encourages us to welcome the prophet and to welcome the righteous.

He says “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”

This pattern of welcoming someone “in the name of” is a Semitic idiom. It is suggesting that the title given to the person is exactly who they are. So, it reads as “whoever welcomes a prophet because they are a prophet will receive their reward.”

People are welcomed not in spite of, but because of their particular identity, gifts and experiences.

A prophet is someone with gifts to speak truth, especially to speak truth to power.

I see this welcoming of a prophet in the summer initiatives at Grace that are having focused conversations around race and racism.

Today the youth at Teen Talk are having a discussion on the movie Just Mercy.

The larger Grace community will also have another opportunity to discuss the film later in the summer too so look for announcements on that.

The movie is based on the book and true story of Bryan Stevenson, a black man and defense lawyer in Alabama who founded the Equal Justice Initiative to provide free legal counsel to those who cannot afford it.

He works to overturn a death sentence for Walter McMillian, a black man who was wrongfully convicted of a crime in a majority white town.

In his pursuit for justice, Stevenson is trying to tell the truth and encourage other witnesses to tell the truth but they are up against a powerful white prosecution team and many white towns people that want someone punished.

I won't share too many more details of the film but Stevenson and McMillian find justice.

By sharing his story Stevenson is participating in the act of welcoming. He welcomes readers, listeners, and viewers into his and McMillian's story to see their experience as vulnerable citizens in their community.

Their story illustrates how McMillian was a "little one," a vulnerable member in his community. He was not protected by the systems that were supposed to provide justice but instead provided only unwarranted punishment.

Sharing their experience Stevenson and McMillin can help change perspectives and encourage us to work to create change within ourselves and our societal systems.

In turn, our predominantly white youth group is welcoming Bryan Stevenson's story, because of his identity and his experience as a black man and his ability to speak truth to power, so we welcome him as a prophet.

Who are other prophets to be welcomed in our community?

I look forward to exploring this question with our Grace youth this afternoon.

The youth welcome me with their insights and their wisdom. These young disciples are truly Christ to one another.

As we journey through life as disciples, we do not journey alone. Christ is with us. We walk trusting in the promises of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. God's love and grace abounds.

I know I certainly have not always been as welcoming as the gospel calls me to be, but through God's grace there is always the opportunity to try again.

Christ calls us to be his disciples in this broken and pandemic ridden world.

Christ calls us to welcome the vulnerable, and the prophet and to receive the welcome and hospitality that is offered to us.

How we practice our discipleship hospitality may look different during this summer of 2020, with facemasks and social distancing, but we are never separated from Christ.

May Christ guide us on our discipleship walk of welcome.
Amen.