

4 Pentecost, Proper 8, Yr. A  
July 2, 2017  
Matthew 10:40-42

You can tell by the insert in today's worship bulletin that we're celebrating something special today. You might also get a clue about that when you see that the entire Eischen family is with us, something that Mike said was nothing short of a miracle. After the peace we'll ask the family to come up for a welcoming ceremony, especially focused on Theo and Sophie. Sophie was baptized in Vienna and we won't, of course, re-baptize her, but we'll simply welcome her into her larger Christian family, along with her parents, Jonathon and Emily, her brother Theo and her godparents, Ellen and Dominic. Given all that, it seemed highly appropriate that the gospel this morning is about welcoming. Jesus is sending his disciples out to preach and live the Kingdom and, as part of their instructions, he's telling them that whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me...whoever gives a cup of cold water will not lose their reward.

So, welcoming. Some of you may remember way back when I was newly arrived among you and, at Christmas time, I repeated a story that Suzanne had told about, I believe, her nephew. He was in the Christmas pageant and he'd been assigned to be the inn keeper, the one who has to turn Mary and Joseph away, telling them there was no room for them in the inn. Well, he was terribly distraught about this and his parents kept trying to explain that it was just a play, etc., but come the morning of the service, he was still upset. So his parents had their fingers crossed that all would go well. The big moment arrived; Joseph knocks on the door of the inn. Their son opens the door and with a big smile says, "Sorry, there's no room, but would you like to come in for a cocktail?"

Hospitality. Henri Nouwen writes about this extensively in his book about the spiritual life called, *Reaching Out*. In that book he describes the movement from hostility to hospitality as one of the moves we make as we develop spiritually. He points out how close those two words are in spelling, but how different in life. Hostility – from the Latin which means enemy – and hospitality – from the Latin that means host. So, he says, we need to move from hostis to hospes. Words so similar standing for a move that's pretty challenging. He wrote that book in 1975 and said then that he found our society "increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people..." who look at the surrounding world with suspicion, always waiting for the enemy to appear, to intrude and to do harm. That was 30 years ago and I don't think you'll disagree when I say that things have gone downhill from there.

Let's look for a minute at hospitality. In popular usage the word has been watered down a lot from its Biblical sense. We tend, these days, to think of hospitality as about having friends over for dinner. But in the Bible, hospitality is about the obligation to welcome the stranger with a reminder that those strangers were often bringing precious gifts. Remember Abraham and Sarah at Mamre that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. Those "strangers" turned out to be God bringing the news that they would finally have that longed-for son. Or remember Elijah and the widow who gave him shelter and shared her last bit of food – in return she received an abundance of oil and flour and the life of her son. In the NT, the story about Emmaus is about

the guest, Jesus, who becomes the host and who brings the gift of his presence to the bereaved disciples. And there are echoes in today's scripture, with the phrase about the cup of cold water, with the story about Jesus and Samaritan woman – they meet and connect across a deep cultural, religious and gender divide. She gives him a cup of water and he gives her salvation.

Jesus uses the language of welcome. The words come from Old English – “well” meaning wellness or well-being or even wealth – the word has a connotation of blessing. And “come” refers to the one who has arrived, the one who is received. So “welcome” – come and be well; come and be blessed. Truly welcoming someone requires effort – it requires preparation and thought and intentionality – and it requires making room, physically and sometimes emotionally. That's one thing with family and friends, although even there, the addition of a new person means adjustment and change. Remember the story of the little boy who meets his parents and the new baby at the door and sweetly inquires whether they remembered to keep the return receipt?

But family and friends aside, welcoming the stranger requires a lot more. Nouwen talks about that welcome, that hospitality, as the ability to create a safe space in which the other can come to life. Not a space in which you can change the other person into what YOU want, but a space in which they can be liberated and come to their own flourishing, their own faithfulness. It has to be, he says, a fearless and free space. But I think, in order to offer that, each of us must first find OURSELVES in a free and fearless place, a safe and open space. So maybe the first movement of hospitality is toward myself – toward acceptance, and forgiveness and tolerance of ME. I was in a conversation with someone who said that she was at a workshop where they were told to write down all the things they didn't like in other people. When they did so, they were reminded that those were probably exactly the same qualities they themselves had and disliked in themselves. I've heard that, as well, but I also heard another part and that was to write down not only all the things you DISLIKED, but also a list of all the things you admired in others and THAT list, with both the negatives and the positives was a mirror for you. So, yes, we're a mixture and yes, we're not perfect and yes, we need to work on that but the biggest truth here, the GRACED TRUTH is that God loves us anyway. So we're already in a safe place. At the offertory, we'll sign a hymn called “I was There to Hear Your Borne Cry” – and by the way, Dominic will sing the first verse to give us a leg-up on it – but pay attention to the words – God's there with us, from the beginning, through our wanderings, through good and bad, to and THROUGH the very end. He has us by the hand and never lets us go. It's that confidence that allows us to exercise the Kingdom demands of radical hospitality.

That hospitality that begins with self, expands to family and friends and keeps moving outward into an ever-widening circle. Because as Matthew says later in chapter 25, it's God's intention that this hospitality, this welcome, this care, extend to the entire human family. Remember Jesus' words there: when you gave someone to eat or drink, whenever you did this for the least of mine, you did it for me. Seeing Christ, seeing God in one another.

I was at a Bjorklunden seminar this past week, which was taught by Roger and which was an incredibly powerful example of people, strangers really, coming together and becoming

community. It was a beautifully hopeful and encouraging time. One of those attending was a friend of Rogers, a retired theology professor, who just happens to be a wonderful storyteller, so one evening we gathered together and listened to stories. I'd like to close with one that I think illustrates the point about seeing God in one another, or, to put it another way, to see each other as beloved children of God. The story is about a Jewish fellow named Jacopi. One day in the synagogue, the Rabbi was preaching. Now the Rabbi always preached in Hebrew, which Jacopi didn't understand, so when the Rabbi said something about *eloheim* (which is God) and *lehem* (which is bread) Jacopi got them mixed up and he thought the Rabbi said that God was bread. Well, he thought, now what do I do about this? So he went home and asked his wife to make some of her wonderful *challah* bread, which she did, and he took it back to the synagogue. Not knowing how to get it to God, he just opened the ark and put it inside and left. Shortly after that, the sexton came in. Now it turns out that this fellow felt he was overworked and underpaid by the community and so was often pretty grumpy. In the course of his duties, as he's grousing around, he opened the ark and saw the bread and thought, "Well! God has finally heard me and sent me this bread." This went on for years until one day, both of them and the Rabbi turned up at the same time. I think it's safe to say that everyone felt a bit cheated. The Rabbi was angry that Jacopi could have so stupidly misinterpreted what he said. The sexton was upset that the bread really wasn't miraculous; Jacopi was upset because he thought all the effort that he and his wife had expended had been for nothing. Unhappiness all around. And then suddenly there was a voice from the corner. It was the village wise man. And he reminded them of all the good that had been accomplished over the years by that original misunderstanding. But then he went on to say that he wanted them to continue – that the sexton should continue receiving the bread remembering that God did indeed provide for him and that now, when Jacopi brought the bread he should place it directly into the hands of the sexton, believing, with perfect faith, that he was placing the bread into the very hands of God.

Hospitality and welcome and generosity – they are there for us to live because by so doing we are imitating and participating in the nature of God. Frederick Buechner says it this way: We have it in us to be Christs to one another – to work miracles of healing and love, as well as to have them worked upon us. Simply put, If we remember how loved WE are, that gives us an opportunity to understand and to see others as equally loved. We have it in us to be Christs for one another. Amen.