

## **“The Welcome Place”**

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Whenever I have a Sunday vacation day, I enjoy worship in other congregations, both to experience worshipping in the congregation instead of in the chancel as well as to experience the worship styles and traditions of other churches. It also provides me with the opportunity to experience being a first-time visitor to another congregation, and how that congregation welcomes me to its worship service. I have had many different experiences with being welcomed as a guest at worship in other churches over the years (I never wear my clerical collar so that my experience might be similar to other visitors, and not like being a visiting pastor who might be greeted very differently). A few weeks ago, I worshiped at one of our neighbouring congregations here in Stratford, and was able to make it through a part of the service until some parishioners recognized me during the sharing of the peace (I’m discovering that Stratford really is a small town!). Several years ago, Susan and I were in Orlando, Florida and became intrigued by a church we saw from the interstate that turned out to be the Episcopal Cathedral for Central Florida. When we arrived for Sunday worship, we were not only warmly welcomed but given a gift basket that served both to give us some information about the congregation as well as identify us as visitors so that congregation leaders could welcome us. It became a highlight of our vacation that also featured visits to Walt Disney World and Universal Studios.

But perhaps my most memorable experience with being a worship visitor was also my most negative. One summer, I was in Chicago by myself for a meeting at the headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. On Sunday, I decided to worship at a church in the nearby suburb of Park Ridge (the hometown of Hillary Clinton). I should have known that this wasn’t going to be a good experience when I tried to find an open door to the building, only to discover that most of the doors were locked and the open door was hidden on the side of the building. When I finally entered the building, finding their worship space proved to be another challenge, since it appeared to be designed by the same people who build corn mazes. After several dead ends, I arrived at the worship space only to find that the ushers were gathered in a huddle with their backs to the entrance door. After standing by for a few moments, one of the ushers finally noticed me and greeted me by saying “Oh, I guess I’m the usher – here,” and handed me a bulleting without even saying “good morning.” I found a seat, went through the entire worship service, signed the guest register, put an offering in the plate – and at no time in the entire service did anyone greet me, or welcome me to worship, or even notice that I was there. Even at the end of the service, the pastor gave me a perfunctory “good morning” without asking if I was new in the community or offering me a word of welcome. I’ll never forget how unwelcomed I felt that morning, and if I was a new resident in that community I certainly would never walk into that building again.

The manner in which we welcome another person can make all the difference. Studies have shown that first impressions are very critical in our decision-making processes, and this includes our first impressions of a church we visit for the first time. The manner in which we are welcomed, the way in which people assist us in an unfamiliar worship tradition, and the greetings we receive both before and after the service play a crucial role in determining whether we will return to this church for a second visit and eventually consider becoming members. Even though many churches advertise “visitors welcome,” it is the way in which they extend a welcome to those who come through the church doors for the first time that show how welcoming a congregation truly is.

I’ve often wondered how different my experience in Park Ridge might have been if I had worn my clerical collar to that service, because it has been my experience that people greet me quite differently when they know that I am a pastor. Sadly, it is true in many situations that people with certain positions of status are often greeted differently than a person who at first appears to be another “face in the crowd.” At the recent Toronto

International Film Festival, a lot of attention was paid to the movie stars who were visited the city to promote their films, including the restaurants who extended special hospitality to these celebrities that most of us would not enjoy. Persons with positions of fame or power often receive special considerations that are not available to all persons; even churches may go out of their way to welcome prominent persons differently than an unknown visitor who comes to worship. This is not only a modern phenomenon, for James warned the churches who received his letter against showing partiality to certain persons while ignoring others who came into their midst, because the church's ministry of hospitality must be extended equally to all persons because all are equally beloved by God:

- “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or, ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?” – James 2:1-7.

Jesus had also warned his disciples of the dangers of showing partiality to the rich and powerful whenever they were hosting a banquet, for their invitations may have the ulterior motive of seeking a favour from these prominent guests in return for one's hospitality, so that it become a case of *quid pro quo* rather than a true extension of welcome in Christ's name:

- “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” – Luke 14:12-14.

Christ's disciples must never attach a price or expect something in return for what they extend to others in Jesus' name, for as *“you received without payment, [you must] give without payment.”* (Matthew 10:8).

This teaching on the proper understanding of welcome and hospitality in the church of Jesus Christ continues in today's Gospel lesson, where even after Jesus' second prediction of his passion his disciples show that they still don't understand what it means to follow Jesus in the way of the cross. As they are traveling through Galilee, Jesus teaches his disciples that *“the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”* (Mark 9:31). But the disciples' response shows a deepening separation from Jesus: *“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”* (9:32). The gift of love that Jesus offers his followers is the *“perfect love [that] casts out fear”* (1 John 4:18); but sadly, the disciples have not opened themselves to experience this fear-resistant love, for they are afraid to ask Jesus about the word they do not understand.

When they arrive at their destination in Capernaum, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them, *“What were you arguing about on the way?”* (9:33). Unlike other scenes in the Gospels where the disciples solicited instruction from Jesus (*“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”* – Luke 11:1), Jesus now asks his disciples what they were discussing on the journey. Their silence shows that they recognize that what they were discussing – *“they had argued with one another about who was the greatest”* – was not appropriate behavior for disciples of Christ. Jesus responds to their behavior with two sayings, showing that even though they were silent he was aware of the content of their discussion. Sitting before speaking puts Jesus in the formal position of a teacher (*“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them ...”* – Matthew 5:1-2). The teachings that follow are presented as an

authoritative word about rank among Jesus' followers. The first saying requires a reversal of status and values in the kingdom of God: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* (9:35). As Christ *"did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness"* (Philippians 2:6-7), so also must the followers of Jesus not look upon their position as a means of gaining power or prominence over others, but a position in which they are called to serve others as Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve:

- "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." – Mark 10:42-45.

Jesus' second teaching is even more radical, although its offensiveness may not be apparent to us. Jesus takes a child from the household into his arms and says to his disciples that *"whoever welcome one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."* (9:37). In our modern world, children are beloved and cherished, and our churches place great emphasis on children's ministries; most of us remember that beloved Sunday school song in which we sing about how *"Jesus loves the little children, all the little children of the world."* But in antiquity, a child was considered a non-person, a reality that is reflected in Paul's letter to the Galatians: *"My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father."* (Galatians 4:1-2). Furthermore, the children would have been with the women, not in the presence of a male teacher and his male students (an attitude that is later reflected when *"the disciples spoke sternly"* to those who *"were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them"* – 10:13). To insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples would have been inconceivable; but in Jesus' teaching, a child – who was socially invisible – was to be treated as a stand-in for Jesus. The disciples are to receive someone as inconsequential as a child *"in my name,"* which gives them the ability to do what they are unable to do by themselves. Martin Luther goes so far as to state that Christ's message is specifically for children, those who were marginalized or dismissed during his time but who had a special place in the kingdom of God that he comes to proclaim:

- "The text clearly speaks about children. One can't get around it. The text doesn't speak of adults, such as the apostles now were. Moreover, it says of children, 'to such belongs.' That is, 'I'm their Christ; I've been promised to them. I've also been promised to you adults ... but you've become too clever.' Thus we have a promise and command for the baptism of children, because Christ said, 'Preach to all nations,' as if he would say, 'I wish to be God of all.'" – *Table Talk*, Fall 1532.

We believe that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord of all, and that *"God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."* (Acts 10:34-35). We give thanks and praise to our God who *"so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life"* (John 3:16), and have been called by Christ to continue the work of the apostles, that *"repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* (Luke 24:47). We believe that as Christ welcomed even those children who were not even considered persons in their time, we must also welcome all persons regardless of their status or position in society, because every person is a beloved and cherished child of God, and when we welcome such a person it is as if we were welcoming Jesus himself; for it is when *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me"* that we will be worthy of being people who prove their love for Jesus when *"just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:35, 40).

- "To think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption." – Karl Barth.

At this summer's national convention of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, our church endorsed the Lutheran World Federation's document "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Church Leaders," in which we state that our Lutheran faith *"teaches that compassion, mercy, love and hospitality are for everyone: the native born and foreign born, the member of my community and the newcomer,"* as we commit ourselves to *"encourage my faith community to work with other faith communities and faith-based organizations to find better ways to assist the stranger."* We welcome all persons into our midst because there are no strangers in the Church of Jesus Christ, for every person who comes through our doors is a beloved child of God, one for whom Christ died.

- "In some ways we are all abominations to God – *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* – and yet somehow, against all reason, God loves us anyhow. Grace declares that we are still God's pride and joy ...We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need 'grace healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. 'To love a person,' Dostoevsky said, 'means to see him as God intended him to be.'" – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

We believe in a Lord and Saviour who *"loves the little children – ALL the little children of the world."* No matter who they are or how they may appear to others, *"they are precious in his sight."* As Jesus loved all of God's children and gave his life so that all might have eternal life, our love and our welcome must also be extended to all without distinction, with no ulterior motives, with the purpose of giving freely without any expectations of return. As Christ has welcomed us into this place, may we strive to make this church a welcome place where all know that there is a place for them in the presence of the Lord. Amen.