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Pentecost 4, 24 June 2020

St. Thomas Lutheran Church  
Bloomington, Indiana

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 10:40-42, NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the tenth chapter.

**C: Glory to you, O Lord.**

*[In this reading Jesus continues his teaching of the twelve in preparation for their task of carrying forward his ministry.]*

"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."

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

**C: Praise to you, O Christ.**

My mom was always a gracious host. When we were growing up, we would always say one of two prayers before supper. The first was,

*Come Lord Jesus, be our guest  
and let these gifts for us be blessed. Amen.*

The second one was,

*For fruit and milk, for bread and meat,  
for all our food so good to eat,  
we thank you God. Amen.*

One night we were having company over and I remember my mom being very clear that we were going to use the *second* prayer that night. The reason for this is because my mom thought they might be Jewish and she wanted to pray a prayer that they could pray with us. "Come Lord Jesus," was NOT that prayer.

So you see how she was.

After she died in 2003, my late wife, Vicki, and I were talking about what we would miss most about her. Vicki told me it was something she always did when we would come to visit her. After we came in with our luggage, we would have to put it down so she could give us all hugs. Then we would clean up a bit and sit down at the dining room table (the place where nearly every worthwhile conversation took place in her house). Vicki's place was directly across from my mom. After she would sit down, my mom would lean in a little and say, "Vicki, how *are* you?" And then she would listen intently for as long as it took her to explain how she was. That was what she would miss most about her. She then asked me, "Who in the world is ever going to do that for me again?"

That, my friends, is welcome. Not simply welcome into her house, welcome to stay the night, welcome to eat her food and drink her beer, but a concern for our wellbeing. A safe place to be where you were loved and honored for who you are.

My sister worked for a number of years at Tony's La'Pizzeria, located on College Hill, just off the campus of the University of Northern Iowa. For some reason, a large percentage of their employees were LGBTQ, and some of them did not feel welcome in their own homes on holidays. So, my mom would welcome them. And it was through these loving encounters and conversations that she began to change her mind about LGBTQ persons. And that would never have happened if she had not been so doggone gracious and hospitable. I wonder if some of them had second thoughts about the church and Christians after their encounters with my mom.

Jesus' words today follow his commissioning of the twelve, where he sends them out, giving them instructions as well as insights that will help guide them in their ministry. One of the things that is very clear from his instructions is that some will welcome them, and some won't. Some will receive the gospel as the good news that it is, others will reject the message, sometimes violently. One thing he said in the very first part of this speech caught my attention this week:

*As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.*

We were studying this passage in seminary and were all confused by what this might mean. All our professor would tell us is, "You know what this means." It was quite frustrating. But he's right. If nothing else, you sure know when your peace returns to you!

Jesus goes on to tell them this:

*If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.*

Two things of note. First, Jesus does not make a big deal about the fact that his disciples would not be welcomed or listened to. He simply tells them to shake the dust from their feet as soon as they leave that house or town. Make it a clean break and leave it all behind. Simple as that.

And when he says that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will be for that town, he is pointing out (as does Ezekiel) that the real sin of those two infamous cities was NOT sexual debauchery, but horrible hospitality. That's how important welcoming hospitality is in the reign of Christ.

Earlier this week I did a little crowdsourcing on Facebook. Here's what I posted:

*I'm looking for examples of times you felt really welcome. Perhaps this was a time when you really needed a welcome or didn't expect to be welcomed.*

In 24 hours I got 25 heartfelt replies. Not a record by any means, but it was clear that many people have stories of how much they appreciated being welcomed and were glad to tell the story. For all the things in our adult life that we forget (I figure I've forgotten well

over 90% of all of my adult life), people remember this. They remember being welcomed, truly and graciously welcomed.

Six times in these three verses Jesus uses the word “welcome” (like he’s trying to make a point or something!). The first one has to do with who will welcome *you*, not about us welcoming others. This section is about being sent out, and the way you go out is pretty specific: *Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.* In other words, don’t pack – not even a change of clothes – and don’t bring any money. Never would I ever go on a trip like that! But maybe that’s the point. You come bearing one thing: the good news of Jesus Christ and all of its ramifications. Nothing else. You will be dependent on the generosity – the welcome and hospitality! – of others. And maybe that’s the point. Be vulnerable. Those who see value in what you bring will welcome you and be glad to provide for your needs; those who don’t see value in what you bring won’t. Perhaps this is a quick and easy way to find out who has ears to hear...

The next two examples have to do with welcoming specific kinds of people: prophets and the righteous. (By the way, when Jesus says “in the name of a prophet/righteous/disciple means that you welcome them *because* they are these things.) Not in spite of but *because* they are these things.

Matt Skinner, a Luther seminary professor, said this week on Sermon Brainwave:

“It’s beyond just a welcome that says, ‘Well, we welcome *everyone* here.’ But no, it’s a welcome that tends to the identity of the person you are welcoming, that’s attentive to who they are, where they come from, what they value, what they need and so on...we need to respect distinction...”

But it’s the last sentence of the Gospel that caught my imagination: *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.* A cup of cold water. It seems like such a simple thing. Just a glass of water. It doesn’t sound like much...unless you’re really, really thirsty. Then it means everything.

Who are the thirsty these days? Who are those in need of welcome, of warm hospitality?

On his debut album, John Prine includes a song entitled, “Hello in There.” The refrain is,

*You know that old trees just grow stronger  
And old rivers grow wilder every day  
Old people just grow lonesome  
Waiting for someone to say,  
“Hello in there. Hello.”*

I don’t mean to say that old people have a corner on the lonesome market, but yeah. They certainly get lonely, especially if they live alone in the time of COVID19. Maybe just to lean in a bit and say, “How are you doing?” and really mean it and really

listen. Maybe that would be a cup of cold water for someone who is really thirsty. And I hardly know anyone who isn't really, really thirsty for a welcome and warm hospitality these days.

If you've ever been rejected or treated with hostility because of who you are, you know that it is about as painful as anything can be. And if you have never experienced this, use your imagination. In the same way that God clearly has a heart for those who are on the margins, those who are vulnerable and needy, so too should we be mindful of those who stand in need of a warm welcome and good hospitality. It can change both the life of the one providing the welcome *and* the one who receives it.

It is so easy on a good day to forget that others are struggling as well. My own pain and struggle are always very apparent to me. But the pain and struggles of others? Yeah. Not so much.

Maybe this week's message is a really simple one. Welcome others, especially those who have been rejected. You can be a cup of cold water for someone who is dying of thirst.

Amen.