

Who Will We Welcome?

Introduction

Our reading this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew tells us early in his gospel that Jesus' mission (Mt 4:17b) is to call people to 'repent' or to turn away from all that binds them – keeps them from living fully as 'kingdom' people – people who are God's people – people who are to demonstrate the same love, grace and mercy – that God demonstrates.

As we come to our reading Jesus has been in the Galilee healing the sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk – he has cured those with what Matthew refers to as unclean spirits – and he has been teaching – his teachings are radical – the kind of teachings that leaves ears tingling, hearts pounding - and people wondering – wondering if they have been thinking rightly – living rightly.

His disciples have been witnesses to all that Jesus has said and done and now it is time for them – to not just know what Jesus has been teaching but to do what Jesus has been doing. Jesus sends them out to the 'lost sheep of Israel' to proclaim the good news – “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” To cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” (Mt 10:5f)

He tells them that not all will welcome them. He tells them that he is sending them out like sheep into the midst of wolves. He tells them that they are not to fear. He tells them being a disciple will require more love than that which we have for our parents, it will require more sacrifice than

we might be willing to give, it will require a giving up of one's whole life – for the sake of Jesus' mission.

Prayer

Scripture

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Shaliah (sha – li – ah) is the Jewish principle of sending one out who represents – the full presence of the one who sendsⁱ. – Shaliah – is the idea that *“The emissary sent by a man is like the man himself.”*

The Secretary of State – at this time Hillary Clinton – is an emissary sent by the President – to represent the President – to speak and act with the authority of the President.

Jesus is sending his apostles out to represent him. To proclaim his message *‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’* And to act in his name *‘curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting out the demons.’*

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Let me be clear here – that literally – Jesus is not speaking to his disciples about being welcoming – but he is speaking about those to whom Jesus’ apostles will go – and it does not bode well for those who do not welcome those Jesus sends.

“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.” (Mt. 10:14)

As disciples of Jesus we are sent as emissaries of Jesus. Remember our reading last Sunday from the very end of this same gospel where Jesus says to his disciples:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you...”

Which means that we – as those who are sent could read this passage – as an assurance of our authority to speak and to act in the name of Jesus:

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me...”

And it could be an assurance of the reward that those who receive the Good News we bring – the power of the Jesus we represent will have.

“Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet receives a prophet’s reward...”

I was at Camp Wyoming this last week and the theme this year was I wonder... Each day we would be invited to wonder – to explore - to discover – to look beyond the obvious –

I wonder where we see God.

I wonder what it is like to be a part of God’s family.

I wonder what it means to trust God.

I wonder where God is when things are hard.

I wonder if Jesus is real for me.

Emile Townes, a professor at Yale Divinity School, wondersⁱⁱ not about how others welcome us but how we welcome others.

“In today’s reading, she writes, our theological focus is on compassionate welcome or hospitality as a form of service to Christ... The simple, basic acts of kindness we perform in genuine welcome of one another are all that God asks of us. We must look around us to see who is in need and then do something about it.”

Professor Townes wonderings about this passage turns the tables on our first thought – instead of making it about ‘them’ – the ‘them’ to whom we are sent – it makes the passage about ‘us’ – and about the importance of the ‘welcoming’ and the ‘hospitality’ we offer in the name of Jesus Christ.

We have said as a congregation that we are called to be welcoming to all people – because God in Jesus Christ – welcomes all people. People that visit – often tell us that this is a welcoming congregation – and they indeed felt warmly welcomed and received. In fact this has become a thing of pride for us.

But as I look out into the pews what I see is a group of people – who for the most part – are very homogenous – pretty much the same. We are pretty white – pretty well educated – pretty middle class. Most of us are pretty Mid-western – we are pretty polite – pretty reserved – pretty comfortable.

It has me wondering who we are willing to welcome.

Just a few months ago we had a poverty workshop here at Echo Hill. The focus of the workshop was not to learn how to become poor – but it was to help us to understand – a little better the culture of those who live in poverty.

We learned many things – we learned a little about why the volume of those who live in poverty is a bit higher than is comfortable for us. We learned that – we speak a different language than many who live in poverty. We learned that – the insecurities of poverty cause people to live in a way that just doesn't make sense to us.

Welcoming – compassionate welcoming – is more than – opening a door – saying good morning – and showing someone to a seat – it is a willingness to understand and to meet people who are different than us on their own turf.

Who are we willing to welcome?

A week ago I was at the home of Cyrus Mudanya to take part in a service for his father who had died in Kenya. Cyrus was leaving for Kenya and this service was for those who would not be going. It was amazing to see the number of people from different African Nations that assembled in that household. There was person from Sere Leone, a couple from Liberia, several from Kenya, another from Ghana.

Cedar Rapids, in comparison to other areas of Iowa I have lived in is a wonderful - diverse community.

Last week at camp I watched as the staff of Camp Wyoming worked to find ways to welcome – into the community Tom Birr’s Korean Family. Will we be willing to learn about different cultures – not just guess – or assume – or think we might know – but to ask questions – to learn languages – to risk looking foolish maybe – in order to welcome – people from other cultures.

Who are we willing to welcome?

Our Presbyterian denomination has just approved language that allows for local churches and presbyteries to decide who they will ordain as elders, deacons, and ministers of word and sacrament. The old language placed great emphasis on a person's sexuality – chastity in singleness – fidelity in marriage. The new language asks us to focus on gifts and calling – it opens the door to allow for the ordination of people who are in same sex relationships.

For years we as a denomination – in my opinion – have spoken out of both sides of our mouths – we have said that we welcome all people – regardless of race, economical background, sexual orientation – but at the same time we did not welcome those who are gay and lesbian to fully use their gifts for leadership within the church.

Who are we willing to welcome?

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to follow Jesus. Disciples not only know what their teacher – Jesus – knows – but they do – what their teacher Jesus does.

As I look at Jesus' ministry in the gospel of Matthew – what I see is Jesus welcoming those who were most unwelcomed.

Jesus is the one – who eats with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus is the one – who speaks to those society ignores.

Jesus is the one – who touches those others will not touch.

Jesus is the one – who goes to those no one else will go to.

Jesus is the one – who welcomes those marginalized – rejected – hurt – by church and so often by us.

Jesus' ministry is marked by the kind of welcoming that goes way beyond a 'hi' and 'hello' – offering a significant sharing of life – as Jesus' engages and gives of himself for the other.

The gift of compassionate welcome and hospitality – it will stretch us – it will challenge us. It is an act of service that we have been called to – even as we – as disciples – have received the gracious welcome and hospitality of Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Eugene Eung-Chun Park, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 3*, commentary on Mt. 10:40-42 p. 191

ⁱⁱ Emile M. Townes, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 3*, commentary on Mt. 10:40-42 p.188.