

“Welcome”
Matthew 10:40-42
Sunday, June 26, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

The story is told of a Kansan who owned a general store. He was a well-intending man who made a habit of offering a verse of Scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. The group of people who sat around the store in this rural area enjoyed the exchanges, because some of the purchases challenged the imagination.

One winter day a Texan stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The locals knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60, and the expensive one cost \$89.95.

He showed him the first. “No, that's not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse.” He showed him the second blanket for \$89.95. “That's not good enough, either. Don't you understand? This is for my horse, and nothing's too good for my horse. Now show me your most expensive blanket!”

The store became very quiet as the storekeeper reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stock, pulled out a plaid one, and spread it on the counter with great finesse. “This is our finest and the only one I have. Colorfast, 100 percent wool, with a very tight weave. It sells for \$250.”

“Now you are talking. I'll take it.” He counted out the money, folded the blanket, and left with a big grin on his face.

As the shopkeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted the money, he said, “Matthew 25:35, He was a stranger and I took him in.”

Hospitality is hard to find.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus gives encouragement to the 12 disciples as he sends them out to carry his message to others. He prepares them for welcome; he also prepares them for rejection. Who do we welcome into our lives? Who do we reject?

I. Who do we welcome?

James W. Cox writes, "You and I tend to offer hospitality to only a limited number of people -- persons whom we already know, mostly relatives and a few close friends. But, in Abraham's time, hospitality was extended to whomever needed it -- strangers and acquaintances alike. In fact, in its original form, 'hospitality' combines two separate words -- one meaning friend and the other meaning stranger. So, from the beginning of its usage, hospitality has carried with it the idea of making friends out of strangers."

I think this church -- The United Methodist Church of Yucaipa -- is pretty good about being welcoming to folks. We can definitely do better, but from what I see, we value hospitality, and we work at helping new folks to feel welcomed.

Randy L. Hyde writes about The Stranger at the Door in his book by that name:

"One night, Mark Ralls, a minister in North Carolina, was leaving his church at the same time a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous was adjourning. He found himself in conversation with a man standing next to his rusty, worn-out Ford, and introduced himself as one of the pastors of the church that had hosted his group. The man sighed and told Mark how long he had intended to 'get back to church.' So Mark invited him to worship. Immediately, the man launched into a story of his life.

"It was, as Mark puts it, 'the familiar string of regrets and loss that accompany addiction.' Mark prayed with him, and they parted ways.

"As he walked to his car, the man called after him with a sense of urgency. 'Did you

mean what you said?’ ‘About what?’ ‘Did you mean that I could come to this church?’

“Mark says that as he drove home he realized the man had told his life story as a way of explaining why he couldn’t come to church. He felt he wasn’t ‘clean enough’ to be included in that kind of congregation.

Asks Hyde: “How clean does someone have to be before he or she is accepted by Jesus? How clean before someone is accepted by you and me?”

“In this inhospitable world of ours, Jesus would have us – I think Jesus would have us – throw caution to the wind. You can’t do that without opening the door. And when you do, you might just find Jesus standing there disguised as a stranger.”

Sometimes we confuse hospitality with entertaining. Karen Mains writes on this topic:

“Entertaining says, ‘I want to impress you with my home, my clever decorating, my cooking.’ Hospitality, seeking to minister, says, ‘This home is a gift from my Master. I use it as he desires.’ Hospitality aims to serve.

“Entertaining puts things before people. ‘As soon as I get the house finished, the living room decorated, my house cleaning done -- then I will start inviting people.’ Hospitality puts people first. ‘No furniture -- we’ll eat on the floor! The decorating may never get done -- you come anyway. The house is a mess -- but you are friends -- come home with us.’

“Entertaining subtly declares, ‘This home is mine, an expression of my personality. Look, please, and admire.’ Hospitality whispers, ‘What is mine is yours.’”

And once we choose to offer hospitality, how far will we go to be welcoming?

J. Burton Williams tells a lovely story of hospitality in his book, The Reward of a Disciple. Writes Williams:

“Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer was going to a monastery for a retreat. The monks observed vows of silence and the retreat was to be meditative and prayerful. Nouwen was delayed and was late getting to the monastery on that miserable, rainy night. He rang the bell, well after bedtime, and was met at the door by one of the brothers. The brother warmly greeted him, took his wet coat, brought him to the kitchen and made him a cup of tea. They chatted in the late night hours and Nouwen began to relax and feel ready for the retreat. But he knew this monk was supposed to observe silence, so he finally asked him, ‘Why are you willing to sit and talk with me?’ The monk replied ‘Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of my order, none is higher than hospitality.’”

Of all the duties of the Christian faith and the rules of the Church, none is higher than hospitality. Our highest duty is to welcome the stranger, to help visitors to feel relaxed and at ease in this place. I think we try to do this here at UMCOY; I’m not sure we always succeed. It is helpful to be reminded from time to time, to be always welcoming of others. Nothing is more important on Sunday morning, and all during the week, than to welcome people into the life of the church, into the joy of the Christian faith, into the fellowship of this corner of the Christian community.

II. Who do we reject?

Some churches practice rejection better than they do hospitality. Writes J. Scott Miller:

“Bob Edmunds, my former colleague in the church where I used to serve in Elmira, New York, tells a story of what it feels like to be denied hospitality. He and his family were vacationing one summer and decided to worship at a prominent church in the Washington D. C. area. Apparently this church had quite a reputation for the quality of their preaching and corporate worship. The reputation held up, according to Bob and Susan's standards. And

believe me, they have rather high ones. The sermon was riveting and the music, inspiring. That much did not disappoint them. But the lack of hospitality did.

“From the moment they arrived at that church to the time they left, not one person spoke to them -- except for the pastor who made a feeble attempt on their way out the door. No one directed them to the nursery. They had to find it themselves. No one invited them to the fellowship hall for coffee and refreshments afterwards. They had to find it themselves. In fact Bob deliberately stood underneath the huge chandelier in the center of that spacious hall for at least five minutes -- gazing up at it and looking as conspicuous as possible. But no one came up to him or introduced themselves to him.

“‘We felt as though we were invisible,’ Bob says. ‘No one noticed that we were even there. I don't care how good the preaching and music were. Nothing could have made up for their lack of hospitality. That church was as cold and lifeless as a corpse.’”

A welcoming church stands in stark contrast to such a cold, lifeless church. Jay M. Terbush writes in his book, The Significance of the Insignificant:

“By the fourth century, the churches in Rome were feeding an estimated 20,000 poor people each week. The church at that time presented to the world a visible alternative to the prevailing social order. As Georges Florovsky has written in ‘Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History’:

“Christianity entered human history as a new social order or, rather, a new social dimension. From the very beginning, Christianity was not primarily a ‘doctrine,’ but exactly a ‘community.’ There was not only a ‘message’ to be proclaimed and delivered and ‘Good News’ to be declared, but there was, precisely, a New Community, distinct and peculiar, in the process

of growth and formation, to which members were called and recruited. Indeed, ‘fellowship’ (‘koinonia’) was the basic category of Christian existence.”

The church, from its earliest days, is a place of fellowship, a place of koinonia, a place of welcoming love. We are especially called to welcome the poor, the lost, and the stranger.

III. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.”

Jesus knows, as he sends his disciples out into the world, that they will face criticism. And so he says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” He encourages them.

If we are followers of Jesus we, too, can take encouragement from his words.

Stephen M. Crotts and Stan Purdum share an old legend about Satan, who was “one day having a yard sale. He thought he'd get rid of some of his old tools that were cluttering up the place. So there was gossip, slander, adultery, lying, greed, power-hunger, and more laid out on the tables. Interested buyers were crowding the tables, curious, handling the goods. One customer, however, strolled way back in the garage and found on a shelf a well-oiled and cared-for tool. He brought it out to Satan and inquired if it was for sale. ‘Oh, no!’ Satan answered. ‘That's my tool. Without it I couldn't wreck the church! It's my secret weapon!’ ‘But what is it?’ the customer inquired.

“‘It's the tool of discouragement,’ the devil said.

“In the text Jesus is talking to the church about their attitude and deportment toward the prophets God sends among us as shepherds. He speaks frankly about acceptance and rejection, about kindness and trust. In short, he promises that in the minister's success among us shall come our own reward.”

Jesus encourages us. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” Jesus encourages us to act in love. “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...none of these will lose their reward.”

Closing.

I close with a beautiful story. It’s a bit long; I hope you’ll bear with me. It’s called, “The Rabbi’s Gift,” from William White’s Stories for the Journey. It offers further encouragement for the Christian journey we share:

“There was a famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks, and its huge chapel resounded with the singing of the choir. But now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised God with heavy hearts.

“On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a tiny hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: ‘The rabbi walks in the woods.’ And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

“One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and open his heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

“After a while, the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face

with his hands and began to cry, too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and moistening the wood of the table with their tears.

“After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. ‘You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,’ he said. ‘You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.’

“The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, ‘The Messiah is among you.’ For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, ‘Now you must go.’ The abbot left without ever looking back.

“The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them that he had received a teaching from the rabbi who walks in the woods, and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, ‘The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah.’

“The monks were startled by this saying. ‘What could it mean?’ they asked themselves. ‘Is brother John the Messiah? No, he's too old and crotchety. Is brother Thomas? No, he's too stubborn and set in his ways. Am I the Messiah? What could this possibly mean?’ They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

“As time went by, though, something unusual began to happen at the monastery. The monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now which was hard to describe, but easy to notice. They lived with one another as brothers who had finally found something. And yet, they prayed over the Scriptures together as those who were still looking for something. Visitors found

themselves deeply moved by the genuine caring and sharing that went on among the brothers. Before long, people were again coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of these monks. And young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

“In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But somehow or other, the older monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.”

The Messiah is among us. Whoever welcomes Him welcomes the one who sent Him. May we receive one another – including the stranger, the visitor, the new person -- with the welcoming joy of Christ, each time we meet.

Amen.