



## ***In Whose Image?***

Rev. Chandler Stokes

Matthew 11:28-30

**The Third Sunday of Easter**

**April 19, 2015**

### *Scripture Introduction*

I was planning to preach on Mark today—the “render unto Caesar” passage, but Wednesday night we had an amazing new members’ session. And again I heard people talk about the welcome and the charge that we give at each service as such winsome gifts to them. And you’ve heard Susan Jennings and me talk about our working on refining the welcome. So I changed direction for my message very late in the week. Our Scripture reading is Matthew 11:28-30—a paradigm for hospitality and work.

### *Scripture Reading*

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”<sup>1</sup>

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Hospitality is an important virtue for us. To do it well takes careful attention. For the last few weeks, Susan Jennings and I have been telling you that we’ve been working on our welcome statement at the start of our service. Hospitality is an art, and currently ours is also a work in progress.

Hospitality is a critical virtue for us. We’re embarrassed if we don’t do it well. We are very glad when we get it right.

In our tradition, hospitality is rooted in Bedouin practice in the wilderness. In the earliest formation of our Bible certain Bedouin values were woven in right from the start—both in the narratives of our people and in the specific laws of our tradition.

Abraham and Isaac, our Bedouin ancestors, are described as strangers and aliens, as those both needing hospitality and needing to *offer* hospitality. Abraham’s welcoming the three strangers at Mamre is a classic description of Bedouin hospitality. Abraham says to the strangers, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”<sup>2</sup> He asks of them only to receive his hospitality.

Bedouin hospitality is likely born of the vulnerability of human beings living in harsh, unwelcoming wilderness with only the occasional oasis to offer safety and rest. Hospitality is a way of saying, “We know it can be rough out there. It can be dangerous. Come on in. It’s safe here. Wash your feet. Rest on your journey.”

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:3-5.

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Old Testament laws reinforce this narrative again and again. The ten commandments in Exodus require that the resident alien, the stranger, be granted the same Sabbath rest as Israelites. No matter where they came from, no matter Whom or What they might worship, they were to be granted Sabbath. It can be rough out there. Rest on your journey. The Law's repeated admonition is that "there shall be *one* law for the native *and* for the alien who resides among you."<sup>3</sup> And "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."<sup>4</sup>

These values of hospitality are continued into the New Testament. *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*<sup>5</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews, alluding back to the story of Abraham says, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*<sup>6</sup> In Matthew, Jesus also identifies himself with the stranger: *... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...*<sup>7</sup>

If you are looking for a biblical theme that stretches from one end of the Scriptures to the other, hospitality is unavoidable; there is no deeper Christian virtue. And in each of the New Testament examples, as at Mamre, the stranger bears the presence of God. Hospitality is a spiritual discipline, a way of seeking the presence of God. I'll come back to that.

What we try to do here at Westminster is to welcome "strangers" or "visitors"—anyone who comes through the doors here in the way that Abraham welcomed the strangers at Mamre, the way that the faithful in Matthew welcomed the stranger. It doesn't matter where you came from. It doesn't matter what you've been through. Come on in. It can be rough out there. Rest on your journey. There is *one* law for the native and for the stranger, one law, one way of treating human beings, regardless of who they are or where they came from; whether you're "native"—you've been here for a while and you know the ropes—or you're brand new, first time in, and not even sure where the restrooms are. This welcome transcends us.

If we do that well, it's likely because we remember what it's like to be a stranger or remember what it is like to be unwelcome. If we do that well, it's likely because we remember that it can get rough out there and that it isn't always safe.

I remember when I was nineteen years old, hitchhiking from San Diego to Santa Barbara. I was distraught, trying to see my girlfriend to try to make up with her. I was a mess: lovesick, long-haired, long-bearded—scruffy, with my thumb out—trying to get some two hundred miles across one of the biggest cities in the world. Brilliant. In my lovesickness, I was pretty disabled. I probably had two dollars

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 12:49.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 23:9.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:37.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:35-36.

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in my pocket. Mine were self-inflicted wounds, but it was rough. It took me thirteen rides and twelve hours to get to Norwalk, a very sketchy part of LA, about half way to Santa Barbara. And it was getting dark.

A guy in an old beater picks me up. It's always a guy in an old beater, right? Somebody who can still remember that it can get rough out there, who can still remember that ... what? He was once a stranger in Egypt.

He tosses his coat over the seat to where his tools are on the backseat to make room for me up front. He's clearly been working all day and he's headed home, tired. He drives me to his house. With no cell phone, he can't call ahead to say, "Honey, I'm bringing this hippie college kid home for dinner." His wife and his daughter are there. They set another place at their table for me. They'd converted the garage into their daughter's bedroom. "You'll sleep in there tonight. She'll sleep with us. I'll take you to the freeway in the morning." I was a stranger, and they welcomed me. They gave me food and something to drink. They gave me their daughter's room. And he drove me a good hour out of his way to get me to the Pacific Coast Highway at dawn, where the first ride I got took me all the way to Santa Barbara.

When people show up here on Sunday morning, they're probably hitchhiking. It can get rough out there. And this is supposed to be an oasis, where anybody who stumbles out of the wilderness—the desert of heartbreak, economic ruin, religious marginalization, of loneliness, grief, sorrow, fear, depression, confusion, violence... where *anybody* who stumbles out of their wilderness can find a place to rest, a place to recuperate, a place to get their legs under them again. If you've got your thumb out, looking for safety, we pray to offer that here.

If you *are* hitching today, there are a lot of people here who've been on that highway. Many in the pews here are acquainted with grief, as it were. They know heartbreak, the foolish pain of self-inflicted wounds, the loneliness and confusion. They know it can get rough out there.

They've ended up out on the highway when they told their church or their parents that they were gay. They ended up hitchhiking because they went through a divorce and their church disowned them. They ended up with their thumb out by the side of the road because they asked a question that wasn't allowed. At our best here, we *remember*... that we were strangers in Egypt, hitchhikers in L.A. That is the hospitality we hope to offer.

As we try to bring that gracious practice here today, I wonder... if that young dad who picked me up in Norwalk, I wonder, if he had told me, "I am a Christian," whether I'd have gone with him. I might not have. I'd already had some bad experiences with "Christians" to make me gun-shy of the name.

Now, if he had insisted that *I* be a Christian in order for him to give me a ride, I don't know what I'd have said. It would not have been *honest* for me to call myself a Christian at that point, but I might have lied to get the ride.

In our understanding of Christian hospitality, his theoretically insisting that I be a Christian would have been inhospitable. "One law for the native *and* the alien"—that is the model for hospitality. "I was a *stranger* (not a member of the community) and you welcomed me." That's what we consider Christian hospitality.

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But let's go back to the barrier that his naming *himself* "Christian" could have been. That's one of the challenges as we perform the art of hospitality here. Sometimes when we offer our welcome on Sunday morning, we say, *In the current religious climate, we feel it's important to say something about the Christianity that we seek to practice here. We don't want the public misuse of Christian language to delude you and thus exclude you from the welcome and love we intend. This is a Christian worship service, and to our understanding precisely because it is a Christian service, absolutely everyone is welcome.*

We say that because, unlike the carpenter in the old beater, whose car said, "Dodge Dart," our sign out front says, "Christian"—we're a church. That name is on us—one way or another. So in that statement, our intent is not first to criticize others. We just know that there are misleading voices out there. And we don't want what others say about "Christian" to cause a stumbling block.

In 2011 the Barna Group, a research institute, surveyed people ages 16 to 29 and asked them about their perceptions of Christianity. Among those who are not part of the Christian community, *ninety-one percent* said that the church is anti-homosexual. And *eighty-seven percent* said that the church is judgmental. Among the many assumptions about who we are, we are trying to overcome at least those two.

In our welcome, we often have followed "absolutely everyone is welcome" with "We do not assume or presume you to be Christian; our hope is that we might be Christian toward you."

For some this language works great. That we don't ask for people's allegiance before we love them feels good, has integrity. A lot of our members and a lot of our newcomers have said, "I love to be reminded that this is what is expected of me. Just because I am or might become 'inside' or a member or whatever it is that allows me to identify with the 'we' in that statement, it means that *I'm* supposed to welcome *everyone* without judgment, regardless—*one* law for the native *and* the stranger. I'm glad to be reminded of that and to have that said. I *want* to be a part of that."

Others, both members and non-members, stumble over the whole "we" and "you" language in this statement. The language itself tends to imply a difference, an insider-outsider feel, even a superiority or condescension of sorts. It doesn't feel right to everyone. We who offer this welcome also struggle with that.

It has been a very helpful critique. We really are trying to get this right. Hospitality is a delicate art.

One of the helpful pieces that Susan Jennings has brought to our welcome is: "By Christian, we mean that we seek to follow Christ, who taught the disciplines of hospitality, justice, and compassion." We want to say something about who we think Jesus Christ is, whose name we bear.

In saying that we hope to follow "Christ, who taught the disciplines of hospitality, justice, and compassion" we are *not* saying we have a corner on that market. It could certainly be that Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or humanism could teach those things, too. We don't make a judgment on those traditions in asserting that we are Christian—but, again, that runs *contrary* to the usual perception and practice of many forms of Christianity. Presbyterians do *not* claim to have a corner on the truth.

At the same time, ours is a Christian community. This is a *Christian* worship service. There is a particular narrative here. We summarize it explicitly in worship. And it's the law the way *Christ* summarized it. We

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look to Jesus. Jesus said, “Love God and your neighbor.” When we say, “Christian,” when we say “love,” there’s a story behind it—that goes back before Abraham, a particular story, where hospitality is a spiritual discipline.

We are simply human, but not *generically* human. No one is generic. Ours is a particular form of human community that seeks a universal love—one law for native and stranger. Our particular spiritual discipline is to welcome strangers, because they could be angels—messengers of the very God we “natives” are seeking to serve.

By naming ourselves as Christian, again, we don’t think we’ve got a corner on the truth, but it is a *specific expression* of truth. “Trying to create a spiritual path without the ‘stuff’ of any specific religious tradition is like... trying to communicate without speaking any language in particular.”<sup>8</sup> The language of this community is Christian. It has its baggage, that’s for sure—and we can’t control that. But it has its blessings.

We are trying to live under the particular commandment, the specific invitation, the actual winsome love of one who said, “Come to me, *all* who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” Here is the well at this oasis—the water tastes like this; it quenches. Come in off the highway. It can get rough out there. Here is food. Here is drink. Here is rest.

That same one went on and said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”<sup>9</sup> Come in off the highway. And when you’re ready, there is work to do. Take this yoke upon you. Learn from Christ. It’s a particular way of learning how to love all humanity. The water has a particular flavor. You will find rest. And you will find work to do and strength to do it.

... which brings me to the close of our service. It’s increasingly obvious that our identity as a congregation is also expressed at the *end* of our service.

The opening, the welcome, is pretty new language. We’ve only been working at it for five or six years now. Although we think it has been in the heart of this place, this people for a long time, the phrasing is all pretty new. The words at the end of the service, the charge and benediction—ah, they are much older and they are equally a part of our identity. They are what we aspire to. They are the work to do. They are the yoke of Christ.

We are trying to pursue this narrative of how Jesus Christ’s life might intersect with ours and say it in just a few sentences at the beginning and the end of the service. Hospitality is an art. And ours is a work in progress.

Within this community, we seek to follow Jesus Christ, who taught the disciplines of hospitality, justice, and compassion. Come in out of the wilderness. Come in off the highway. And let’s do that together. We

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey: Deepening Ordinary and Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 11:29–30.

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are all strangers. We are all native. Let us together renew our vision of this one who gives us the grace of this work to do.

Let the people say, Amen.

### *The Charge*

Go into the world in peace. Have courage! Hold on to all that is good. Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord your God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.