

The Call to Welcome

Matthew 10:40-42, Matthew 18:1-5

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In the Christian community, we speak a lot about hospitality. Because of the teachings of Jesus Christ, we understand hospitality to be an inherent part of who we are. We strive to be a congregation that welcomes all of God's people, as they are, and loves them without condition. These two short passages that I just read illustrate how important it was to Jesus that we keep our doors and our hearts open to each other. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," he said to his followers. "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me." It's clear – the way we treat each other, and the ways we do (or do not) welcome each other into our lives...that's the way we are relating to Jesus himself.

What images come to your mind when you think of the words "hospitality" and "welcome" I have a few. I think of myself, three weeks into my seminary education, when I had taken a job working at a church an hour away from my apartment. A couple who were just a little older than my own Mom and Dad, whose kids were all grown and out of the house, gave me a key to their home and the assurance that I would always have a place to sleep when I worked late or had to be at work early the next morning. They had met me exactly once before the day they handed me that key. I think of those dear people as part of my extended family to this day.

When I think of hospitality and welcome I also think of wonderful times around so many of your tables, or you all around our table, sharing a meal and getting acquainted at a deeper level. I remember some extraordinarily delicious meals, but more importantly I remember the stories and the laughter. I grieve that (because of concerns about the coronavirus) we cannot share meals

right now, either at the church or in our homes, but think of the good times we are going to have when this passes!

When

Jesus uses the phrase “whoever welcomes one such child” I cannot help but remember the way my own children were welcomed by St. Matthew when they were born. Never will I forget the gifts that were given, the meals that were brought, the babysitters who stepped up, and the clothes that were handed down. I remember weeping with Ed after the baby shower you all had for us as we waited for Samuel’s birth. I was so touched that that all these people were just waiting, holding their breath, to bring our child into the fold. I wished that every child born in this world could have that kind of welcome. These are the memories that flood my consciousness when I think about the call to welcome that we are to take seriously as followers of Jesus Christ.

Those memories, and hopefully you have similar ones, are not wrong. Relationship and acts of kindness between people in each other’s immediate orbit are the foundation on which a ministry of welcome is built. However, I also believe that Jesus is calling us to think about our responsibility to welcome others at the macro level of society. It’s wonderful when we welcome new friends to our neighborhood or our church, but what does it mean to be a welcoming people? A hospitable society? An openhearted nation? We live in a time when it is important to ask ourselves those hard questions.

A couple of weeks ago in my Sunday sermon, I made reference to a novel I was reading at the time called *The Flight Portfolio*. At the time, I recounted a conversation between two of the book’s main characters to illustrate how deeply racism is embedded in American culture and even in our psyches. I was only about halfway through the book at that time – it’s pretty long

and it took me another week to finish it. It was worth the effort, though, because I am still thinking about it and reflecting on the issues it brought up for me.

You see, *The Flight Portfolio* is set in World War II after the fall of Paris to the Nazis. It's primarily set in a city called Marseille, where there was an intentional effort on the part of the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) to get as many Jewish and anti-Nazi refugees as they could out of France and to safer locations. It's historical fiction, but the work of the ERC and their leader in France, American journalist and humanitarian Varian Fry, was very real.

As one gets deeper into the story, lots of ethical questions come up. For example, the work of the ERC started out very narrow in scope. Their mission was to preserve Europe's cultural legacy, so the refugees they were charged to work with were painters, writers, philosophers, actors, and other cultural luminaries. It's wrenching to read of artists coming to the ERC with their portfolios, and with evidence that they had shown their work in galleries, or that they were professors of art at universities in their home country, all to prove that they were real artists and therefore worthy of attention by the ERC.

As the war goes on, the staff of the ERC begins to raise questions about their focus being so specific. What makes one life worth more than another? Should one person be denied a visa because their writing hasn't been published and another person's has? What about children who haven't had the chance to do something extraordinary with their lives? And how about fully formed adults who haven't made the history books but were fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, friends – trying to live their lives and worship their God and leave the world a little better than they found it? Are they not worth saving from the horrors of the death camps? The ERC eventually started expanding the scope of who they would save, concentrating on whose

situation was more dire instead of what they had accomplished in their life.

The situation in the novel (and in real life) was further complicated when the American consulate ceased to cooperate with the ERC's work. Varian Fry was forced to begin skirting the edges of legality, and eventually he was crossing over them entirely. He began working with forgers to make fake documents for people who couldn't get real ones. He developed relationships with gangsters who were smuggling contraband into France but who were more willing to stow refugees on their ships than were law abiding Americans. Lives were at stake, Jewish refugees were facing deportation back to Germany and certain imprisonment in concentration camps, but at various points during the war the United States thought we had allowed "enough" Jews to find safety here. Varian Fry's soul was tormented by what he knew awaited the refugees if they were deported back to their countries. He chose to work outside the law to save as many people as he could until he was caught. In a situation like that, who is more culpable? The lawbreaker? Or the ones who create laws that are so unjust that people lose their lives?

Eventually Varian Fry himself was arrested and deported from France, and he was haunted for the rest of his life by what he had been unable to accomplish - even though he got at least 2,000 refugees out of France, and maybe as many as 4,000. One of the reasons I find myself thinking about that story so much is the call to welcome that is inherent in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. I didn't live through World War II, but I'm a student of history, and I see that period of time as just one example of a time when we as a people forgot our call to welcome others. The call to welcome includes *paying attention*, holding leaders accountable, and being willing to make sacrifices ourselves when doing so can save children of God who are

persecuted and oppressed.

What are we to do with these parts of our history, and with the world we are living in now?

There are still children, at our borders, living in appalling conditions and separated from their parents. There are people who try to move here because they don't believe they can live safely in the country where they were born. Or some people try to move here for economic opportunity – they want to support their families just as we do. Look, I

know that questions about population and immigration are complicated. Not everyone can move here, but not everyone wants to either. Part of what we can do as people of faith is work to create a world where everyone can live safely and have opportunity, wherever they happen to be born. I'm not trying to solve the whole immigration debate here, but I do think that part of our role in important questions of social justice is to *remember who we claim we are*. Part of that remembrance is reckoning with what Jesus taught us, where we have done well, where we have failed, and how we can do better. There are moments in time when our call to welcome – and our living up to that call (or not) – can make the difference between living and dying for someone. I pray that God will give us the discernment and the courage to handle that responsibility.

Amen.