

In walking around my neighborhood the other day, I noticed several folks have hung “welcome” signs on their respective homes. We have one hanging on the wall of our 3 ½ season porch. I’d have brought it to church to show it off but it’s kind of stuck to the wall. An old friend from my Wisconsin days painted it in the traditional Norwegian style called “Rosemaling.” It says “VELKOMMEN” [“welcome” in Norwegian]– and every time I look at it, I think of my friend Jeff, my home state, my heritage, and how much I love all that it represents.

Today’s gospel reading is very short (less than 90 words) and quite simple in its message. As part of the “Mission Discourse”, Jesus is providing instruction to his disciples on how they are to spread his Word to the people, to strangers, how to be missionaries, how to behave with compassion and love. Kind of a “Discipleship 101.” Jesus’ message is as vibrant today as it was almost 2,000 years ago.

The word WELCOME is stated six times in Matthew’s gospel. And it covers a lot of ground – Matthew describes what happens when we welcome Jesus,

God, prophets, and righteous people, and when we offer a cup of cold water to someone in need.

Merriam-Webster lists several synonyms for “welcome” including EMBRACE, GREET, and ENJOY [my favorite]. When we welcome – embrace – greet – enjoy the stranger in Jesus’ name, we are missionaries of his love. We are the disciples.

One of the best practices for classroom management suggests that teachers stand at the door of the classroom at the start of the day and greet students by name, with a smile. It sets the tone for the day. As a classroom teacher for many years, I can attest to that. For some kids, that teacher’s greeting might be the only positive acknowledgement a child has experienced. And after a bit, that regular morning greeting becomes a lifeline for a child whose world might otherwise be a struggle. For some teachers, it might be that the practice of welcoming turns their own lives around. Like begets like, right? You give love, you receive love in return.

Because we are human and therefore imperfect, sometimes being welcoming isn’t so easy. Sometimes the “stranger” is well known to us, but we’ve avoided or failed at being loving. Whether the “stranger” is our spouse, teenage child,

sibling, neighbor, or a parishioner we aren't sure about. Maybe we didn't say "hi" or "how was your day?" or "glad to see you here at church today" because it was easier to look past them or keep doing whatever chore, task, or hobby that was taking up our time. Our human ways and imperfections are very real.

So, how do we see Christ in the people closest to us, even when we or they are tired, distracted, cranky? Episcopal Missioner Dani Lee writes that "Christ never invites us to a life of ease. Christ might come to us the most in those who are the easiest to dismiss." She suggests we re-center ourselves in Christ instead of being self-centered. Start small. Offer your version of the cup of cold water, whether it's a smile, sharing time together, or really listening to what someone is saying.

We can't fix all our relationships or suddenly like all people. Christ might come to us though in the small, ordinary, even annoying human behaviors. Then what? We are called to be followers of Christ; to be his disciples and his sheep. By turning our lives to God, we cannot be the same as before.

Bishop Michael Curry taught us that love is a practice. Turning is the first step, and a life-long practice where we turn toward God again and again.

Our own Reverend Sandi reminded us on Trinity Sunday that we are called by God to be the Good News. We are called to “create communities where people are welcomed...and loved. Where every person is treated as bearing the image of God.”

Matthew’s gospel is not just Good News for our ears. It is a clear directive on how to experience being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

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