

A Warm Welcome
Sermon by Jillian Flynn
June 28, 2020

Matthew 10:40-42 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

As some of you may have heard the Flynn family recently moved. With the help of many family members and loved ones we relocated closer to our immediate families while maintaining social distancing (of course). Though this move meant that our little man would be minutes from his grandparents, have double the room to spread his toys and play, and he would one day be attending the same schools as Mommy & Daddy, the move remained bittersweet. It has not been easy to say goodbye to our first home, the home we grew our family in, and the home where I celebrated my graduation. I take solace in knowing that though we say goodbye to the physical home the memories will forever stay with us. However, what I cannot take with me is my neighbors. In our few years in the Camby area Hoosier hospitality flourished as we connected with those living next door and across the street: sharing baking supplies, providing prayers when loved ones were sick, children playing together, through it all our neighbors became more than someone to share space with, they become our , an integrated part of our daily lives. And as we prepare to officially sign the house away, I hope that these wonderful people can befriend the new homeowners while at the same time praying we will be welcomed with the same hospitality by our new neighbors.

As I slowly relearn the town and make small talk with my new neighbors, I am grateful to be in a position where our family does not move often. I think of those families who for their careers or life circumstances find themselves relocating every year or two, if not more often, and my gut feels anxiety for them. The reality of having to find new routes to work, make new friends for coffee dates, learn the aisles in the grocery store, and continually have new neighbors who may or may not welcome you feels absolutely unnerving to my structured personality. I imagine on a much larger scale, this was some of the anxiety the disciples were feeling in today’s passage from Matthew. In today’s reading, Jesus speaks to the disciples as they prepare themselves for the work of ministry, which looked distinctively different during these times. Though we may complain and gripe about all the Sundays we have had to gather together virtually, the ability to connect spiritually and share the Gospel with others from our own home is a huge blessing. And I think after months apart we have come to realize how large of a blessing it is to be able to worship alongside one another, a blessing we may have taken for granted prior to Covid. In comparison to the prophets who Jesus speaks with in this passage we have it easy: For the 12 to heal and love in the name of Christ meant to travel by foot, town to town, not knowing where they would sleep at the end of the day. The disciples were stepping out in faith, once again, leaving behind not only their family, but also their

comfort zone, their homes, their surety of food. Having felt the call to share the love and grace of God, they take Jesus' commandments to do the work of ministry, preaching the Gospel in far-away places. This meant that they would be dependent on the hospitality of others for lodging and food.

This particular passage is actually part of a larger speech providing travel instructions to the disciples, instructions not only of safety, but also of how to heal and love. Additionally, Jesus warns the disciples of the hostility they most likely will endure throughout their travels. This is followed by encouragement to be fearless in their preaching, working despite the persecution. Though people at the time were much more accustomed to allowing strangers to live in their home, those who found themselves traveling were at the mercy of the town they found themselves in at dusk, one could only hope that he or she could find a family who would welcome them in for food and slumber for an evening. To make things more terrifying for these men and women, there was a growing opposition developing towards Jesus, and his messages of grace. In other words, even if the early disciples found a town, the people in the town may not welcome them into their homes for rest and renewal. A warm welcome was not a guarantee for the disciples.

One commentator writes, "Matthew Probably assumes that the person who extends hospitality to a prophet is himself or herself a Christian" (119, Douglas Hare, Interpretation). After traveling all day, they had to find a very particular person willing to welcome them in. This statement is not meant to imply that Christians were an elite group kinder and better than all others, but instead a sentiment of the risk it would have been for these individuals to welcome the disciples into their home, a risk taken out of faith. If there was opposition in the town towards Christianity, to allow a disciple into one's midst was to align oneself with the outcasts and underdogs, possibly bringing legal consequences upon oneself. The people allowing strangers into their home were said to be Christians, whether they knew it or not, because they were trusting that God's grace was enough to overcome the town's pushbacks and those with homes went ahead and showed love and compassion amongst a world of political divide by extending welcome to the disciples.

Jesus then states that the one who welcomes the disciple into their home, welcomes in Christ as well. This does not mean Jesus is traveling alongside every disciple, but to welcome in a person, regardless of who they are, is to be doing the works of love Jesus himself demonstrated. "The one receiving a prophet is generously promised a reward equal to that awaiting the prophet" (119, Douglas Hare, Interpretation). The leap of faith some took was very similar to that of the early martyrs, even if they were in trouble within the town, they would stay aligned with love, compassion, and peace above all else. For those welcoming in disciples, kindness triumphed over hate. They were called to open their doors, and in doing so they would receive great rewards beyond this world.

For us today it may sound odd to allow a stranger to come sleep in our home, but we do know very well what it means to invite a minister into our homes to share scripture and praise, we have been doing it every Sunday as we turn on our devices and worship from wherever we find ourselves. We are in one since doing what the early believers were asked to do to welcome in Christ, by inviting someone into our

home virtually to share faith stories. And yes, turning on Facebook to listen to a sermon does keep us connected spiritually, but such actions seem to only scratch the surface of what it means to honestly welcome someone, anyone, as Jesus speaks of today in this passage.

See in the passage read this morning, in the original Greek, it is unclear whether or not the townspeople are welcoming in the physical person, the missionary, the disciple, or if the welcome is extended to the Gospel. The vagueness brings into question what exactly does Christ mean when he says, “whoever welcomes you” or “whoever welcomes a prophet” or “a righteous man”. Is the welcome simply allowing the person to have a place to sleep or a “cup of water.” or is there more to this concept of Welcoming someone? For the disciples and early missionaries of the church, they needed more than a place to stay and eat, they needed someone to listen to their message and to have the courage to share that message again. They needed someone willing to reach out and learn of their experiences of faith. A warm welcome, the one which I believe Jesus is talking about here, then extends beyond opening the door and pointing someone to the guest room. A warm welcome does not even require someone to have spare lodging space. The warm welcome comes in one’s willingness to be with another person, a stranger, an outcast, and allow them to share their story. The disciples were not fancy dressed or well-groomed. To be honest they probably smelled bad and ate a lot. Instead they like Jesus were of a lower class, the ones with no worldly possessions or status. Their life’s work was the work of telling a story and hoping someone listens and they then make the transition from the one who listens to the ones who would themselves start sharing the story of Jesus.

One commentator suggests that “The call to this life of mission is not directed to the twelve only” (263, NIB). Matthew uses this retelling of the story to remind the people he is writing to of their call to share the good news. The spirit thus continues to move and inspire people long after Easter. That is to say that any person, at any stage of life can live into a call of mission to love and heal and do the work of ministry. We are called to this life of mission just as much as the disciples in this passage, and so are all our brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues, neighbors and strangers. We are thus in a position where we may need someone to welcome us while simultaneously being called to extend the same graciously warm welcome to all other people we cross paths with.

Such a sentiment to care for all people comes at the end of the passage, as Jesus reminds people of the need to care for the little ones by providing them with water. We see throughout the Gospels the use of the phrase little one’s not to speak of children, but to speak of the lower class, the poor and meek. Jesus adds in a reminder to welcome these people so that people do not quickly forget that they too represent Christ. (119, Douglas Hare, Interpretation). Stanley Saunders, an associate professor at Columbia Theological Seminary states it this way, “ The identification of the little ones, in need of a cup of cold water, instead elevates the least powerful member of the community of disciples into a position equal in importance to that of prophets and righteous ones.” Such an elevation of importance can be so powerful to someone who has been disenfranchised or stripped of their rights and powers, or treated like less than human. Young or old we can elevate people just as Jesus did by

welcoming them to share their stories and sitting with them throughout both their joys and pains.

The essence of welcoming someone is not about awaiting the award that will come after one's good deeds, but to create a world of peace and love here on earth that feels like a constant reward. By standing alongside, sitting amongst and opening one's heart to all people who cross our paths we can begin to notice that God comes to us in all forms, especially the stranger. Society may trick us and demonize certain people because they seem different or they are doing something novel. Take courage in knowing that by welcoming these people into our lives, we are not betraying anyone, but we are welcoming in Christ. And, like the disciples, such a warm welcome does not always entail a bed and a meal. A warm welcome is an openness to sit and listen to someone, be still in a moment of their life so that their voice is heard and the spirit of God working through them is recognized by you. When we give people the space to own their story and share their experiences, we welcome one another in such a way that respects their personhood, and we allow for God to continue to make connections within a world that wants to divide. In doing so we empower and support one another through difficult times by demonstrating to them that their life does matter and their voice can be heard.

