

“Acts of Welcome”

Mark 10-13-16

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

October 4, 2015

Welcome. Welcome to Christ the King. Welcome to worship. Welcome to the portion of worship service when we unpack the gospel lesson, when we break it down and try and figure out how to apply it to our everyday lives of faith. Welcome. It's good to have you all here!

During these next eight weeks, we're extending our conversation about compassion. Yes, we've taken down the t-shirts and brought back more traditional altar paraments and vestments, but we are still thinking about our theme verse for this year: As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved clothe yourselves with Compassion, Kindness, Humility, Meekness and Patience. That's what we've been focusing on the last three weeks.

Now, as we return to the regularly schedule Lectionary, already in progress, as we look at the assigned texts for rest of this season after Pentecost, which brings us to the end of the entire church year, and interesting thing was revealed. Each of the gospel readings for the next 8 weeks, when seen through the lens of putting Compassion into Action can be seen as holding up a particular act of compassion. And so we'll think about how we, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, how we are called show Christ's compassion by practicing acts of Welcome, Courage, Service, Freedom, Faith, Giving, Trust and Truth.

Today, we consider acts of welcome. And here, I want you to help me: I want you to think about a time you have experienced hospitality—that you have been on the receiving end of a compassionate act of welcoming. When did you feel particularly welcomed—like someone actually went out of their way to welcome you? Think about that a little bit—and then turn to someone near you and share what you've come up with—a time you felt like someone made you feel welcome. Go ahead, I'll give you a couple of minutes so you each get a chance to share.

Quickly—in two or three words—what were some of these welcoming situations you've experienced? [pause]

We all have our stories of times we felt particularly welcomed. I remember a few distinctly well. One was when I arrived at Luther college as a freshman over 30 years ago. Unlike most of the students showing up with their station wagon, vans or even U-Haul trailers full of stuff, I had flown in from Florida and my grandparents dropped me off with only my two suitcases, which contained nothing resembling anything you would consider appropriate for winter. Still the welcoming committee was there in full force, and two sophomore guys—whose names I actually remember, since they were both “Tim,” came and got my suitcases and ushered me up to the 2nd floor of Ylvisaker hall. My roommate wasn’t there yet, but the Tims introduced me to my next door neighbor, John Mattheis and the guy two doors down, Eric McDonald, each of whom I have stayed best of friends with ever since, visiting each other on both coasts and a total of three foreign countries over the years. I was out of my element, a stranger in a strange land, and within minutes I was welcomed into a place and by people I would long consider “home.”

I remember a second act of welcome, one repeated several times a year over the decade my family lived in Senegal. A few short months into our time in Dakar, the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr rolled around and we were invited to share the festive meal with Aly and Mariama Ndione and their family. They explained the meaning of the festival, shared their blessings and prayers for us, gave us space to pray in our manner, and then shared a great meal with us all. A month and a half later, we were back this time for Eid al-Adha, then soon it was Tamkharite, the Muslim new year, then birthdays, US Americans among Senegalese, white people among black people, Christians among Muslims, we were welcomed into their home—and the homes of many others—and made to feel part of their family, part of their community, part of their society.

And while it might seem less grand a gesture I remember my first day here at CtK as one of those times of experiencing a compassionate act of welcome. Not only did the sign our front blink frequently to words of welcome, my office had bright balloons along with a card signed by dozens of confirmations students and their teachers waiting for me in my office. These acts of welcome that we are called to practice, they come in all shapes and sizes.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus has to remind his disciples that this act of welcoming is central to who they are as followers of Christ. Can you believe it—they weren't letting the children get close to Jesus, they were speaking sternly to those people—parents, I would presume—that wanted to bring their kids in to see Jesus, to get to know Jesus, to be touched by Jesus. Their intentions may have been noble—they were trying to protect Jesus, maybe, they were trying to preserve him for more appropriate or worthy audiences—but no, Jesus we're told was indignant as he told them "Let the children come to me. Let them come to me and do not stop them. For it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs." And he goes on, "you have to receive God's kingdom, God's dominion, God's reign as if you, too, were a little child, or else you will not enter it." He tells them, not only should you welcome these little ones, not only should you stop hindering these "others" from being here with me, you should really try to be more like them. Learn from them. Emulate them. Imitate them. Be like them. This act of compassion, this act of welcoming the child in Christ's name, this act of showing hospitality to those typically kept outside the fold, all of this, Jesus tells us, is not only something we need to practice, but it is something through which we can expect to be changed, transformed, renewed. It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. Be like them if you want to receive that kingdom, too.

These compassionate acts of welcome shouldn't be surprising or foreign to us as followers of Jesus. Throughout the biblical witness, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the new Testament, offering hospitality is not an optional activity, but rather is a central expectation of the people of God. It emerges from our knowledge and experience of the hospitality God has first shown to us. Abraham and Sarah were welcomed as they travelled. Freed from slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel wandered as strangers, foreigners and refugees and were called on to welcome the stranger since they had also received welcome.

In the New Testament, hospitality is shown to be a mutual thing—given and received—both in the ministry of Jesus, and later in the early church. Actually, throughout the Gospels and Paul's letters, and for much of the church's existence, hospitality was seen to be a place of great transformation, where guests became host, when the receiver becomes the giver, where the outsider becomes an insider and where ALL are transformed. As one author

writes, “many of us know that we SHOULD offer hospitality, but we wonder whether we CAN. Hospitality is made up of hard work [often] undertaken under risky conditions and without [*intentional* commitments to welcoming strangers] fear crowds out what needs to be done.¹

But here’s the short answer to that age-old question. Yes, we can. Yes, we can offer hospitality to strangers, to others. Yes we can practice compassionate acts of welcome to children and to other more vulnerable folks around us. Think about that church outside of Monrovia, Liberia, for a moment, the Believers Bible Chapel. They practice compassionate acts of welcome, they open up space for transformation all the time. They saw a need for broadening education among the children of their community, and so they started a school, right in their church. They got to know kids who were far from home who came to the city to be part of the school, and so they gave them shelter and food—both in their church building and in their own homes. When Ebola struck, when some of their students died and when 20 more were orphaned, they simply took them into their homes, too. They welcomed them as their own. It’s simply part of who they are—after all the first name of their church is Believers.

Think back to those times when you felt that someone went out of their way to welcome you. Remember what it felt like? Remember how you were changed? Think, too, of the ways we are called upon as Believers in Jesus Christ to welcome children in his name. Think about how we might also welcome children, strangers, and so many others in his name.

Clothed with compassion, we ask Jesus to show us the ways we can put that compassion into action, the ways we can act to welcome one another. As we worship and sing, we invite Jesus once again to fill us with your love. Show us how to serve all the neighbors we have from you.

¹ Ana María Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed., San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 35.