

A Lectionary 13 6.28.20

Matthew 10:40-42

Focus Statement: Remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.

At first read, the Gospel text for today felt like quite the refreshing break after a rough couple of weeks. After two weeks of, “see I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves” and “do not think that I have come to bring peace... I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” “whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” felt like ok a text about welcoming, here’s something we can handle. Welcoming, after all, is something we’re pretty good at. We joke about it all the time, right, how Trinity is the friendly church. And every church says they’re welcoming, but not to toot our own horns too much, but you guys actually are legitimately very welcoming. That’s not to say we do it perfectly, but we’ve done the work. Longer than some of you really wanted to, I made us go through the whole process, and we have a long statement of welcome hanging in the entryway of our building, plastered on our website, and in every printed bulletin that lists, in detail, who we are prepared to welcome.

I know that going through this whole welcome statement process felt like overkill, we’re welcoming, doesn’t having this extensive list run the risk of leaving someone out that we might welcome and thus leave someone excluded. Isn’t the blanket “all are welcome” a more inclusive welcome than this detailed list we present? In the strict dictionary definition of the word, yes. But in the actual, flesh and blood, messy and imperfect world we live in, no. If you have Netflix, watch the first episode of the new season of Queer Eye. First off, it’s just about the best explication of the Lutheran faith I’ve ever seen and it includes my parent’s bishop and a church that reminds me a lot of Trinity. But in the

subject of what we're talking about, one of the tensions that arises is the pain LGBTQ Christians experience in congregations that proclaim "all are welcome" while making it very clear that welcome does not extend to them. Or does not extend to all parts of them, to their authentic selves. We said people with disabilities were welcome, but until this winter we didn't have a fully handicap accessible restroom. Our hearts were ready to be welcoming, but our building, quite frankly, was not. The welcome was well-intentioned, but it wasn't truly available. Now, not only do we have the restroom but if you've driven by the church recently, Wayne outlined for us some van-accessible handicap parking spaces. Our facility is starting to match our declaration.

These things took work, take work. It's been a process, one that is still on-going, to make our building fully accessible to people with a variety of disabilities. It was a process, one that stretches well before I got here, and it is an on-going process to be a congregation that is ready and willing to welcome people of different sexual orientations and gender expressions. It is work to welcome new people, to get used to new ideas, to adapt to new ways of doing, being, worshiping, and working together in the world. Being welcoming takes time and it's hard. We've been roommates with Co-op for going on fifteen years now, and we still fight over who moved the coffee pot, right. It takes patience. But we know it's worth it. We know the time and effort and energy has been worth it. As this text tells us, when we have welcomed our neighbors, we have welcomed God.

But, you knew there was going to be a but, but, two things actually. First but, we are in the middle of a global pandemic. One where in Michigan if you test positive for COVID-19 the

first question you will be asked as part of the contact tracing efforts will be, “what church do you go to?” Because epidemiologists predict that churches will be the number one spreader of the coronavirus in Michigan. Number one. Number two is bars. All of you who’ve spoken to me have been super supportive of the decisions we’re making to try and keep people safe, but if you’ve been chafing at the bit a little bit, feeling like I’m being too cautious in keeping us closed, and soon in keeping us outside, because restaurants, hair salons, and so much else is opening, well, that’s the reason. So the first but is this question, what does it mean to be welcoming when being together is dangerous to public health?

Honestly, I think being welcoming now looks like this. Looks like what we’re trying to do. Being welcoming, really, truly, authentically, welcoming, in this time, means being a little bit unwelcoming. It means we’re going to be uncomfortable in worship for a while. We’re going to be outside. Though, honestly, I was thinking about this and its summertime and our sanctuary doesn’t have air conditioning. Outdoor worship may actually be more comfortable than what we traditionally suffer through in the summer. It gets hot in there. But, we’re going to be uncomfortable not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. We’re staying online, and when we do gather again we will wear masks and social distance not to protect ourselves, though that’s a bonus, but to protect our neighbors. So cases stay low and kids can go to school in the fall, so the economy can stay open and people can have jobs. Worship will not be as easy to engage in for a time, and, weird as it seems, that’s welcoming right now.

And but number two, and this is the harder one, but number two is this text isn't actually about welcoming at all. This text is a call for us to be welcomed. Listen to the opening line again, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." Not, "when you welcome someone you welcome me," but "whoever welcomes you welcomes me." Friends, this text is calling us to be not the welcomer but the welcomed. Being the welcomed is hard because being the welcomed means giving up control of the situation, it means giving up the power, it means opening ourselves up to be vulnerable and be served by another.

Think about it. When we welcome someone into our space, yes it forces us to adapt and change if we are really being authentically welcome, but we still hold all the cards. When you have company over, you clean for them, make sure things are nice, arrange your schedule and your home to accommodate them, but it's still your home and your schedule. When you are the welcomer, you have the ability to adapt the level of that welcome at any time. But when you are the welcomed, you are at the mercy of another. You have to trust that they will take care of you, that they are watching out for your allergies, that they aren't letting rabid beasts running through their house, that their house is structurally sound. I'm being a bit melodramatic here, but you get the point.

There's also, for me at least, this hesitation that I don't want to be a burden on someone else. I don't want to inconvenience them, to impose myself upon another. But thinking about it through the lens of this text, that's kind of selfish of me. Because if Christ comes with the welcomed, by holding the role of welcomer I am denying others the ability to welcome Christ. It's selfish of me, and it's also not completely accurate. Part of me doesn't

want to inconvenience others, but part of me, probably the biggest part of me, doesn't want to be uncomfortable. I don't want to have to feel guilty or imposing, I'd rather just be self-sufficient.

I was thinking about all this the other day, and I was reminded of a conversation Tish and I had way back in February about going through hard times. Tish remarked that a verse that had sustained her was First Thessalonians five, eighteen which says, "give thanks in all circumstances." We discussed how Paul didn't say, "give thanks FOR all circumstances" but "IN all circumstances." The word choice matters here, because this is not an expectation that every horrible thing that happens is the will of God and thus we need to be happy about it. Rather it is the promise that in every hard thing, there is something we can be thankful for.

I was thinking about this conversation, and I started to ponder what I am thankful for in the midst of the coronavirus. At first I was like, nothing. This is a horrible virus that is ruining people's lives and livelihoods, and there is nothing to be thankful for. But then I thought about how uncomfortable I am, and I thought, maybe the opportunity to practice being uncomfortable is in some ways, a gift. Because being uncomfortable now, learning to worship with a mask, to stay apart from you, to shift the way I do ministry, is teaching me how to engage more fully in other uncomfortable situations. It will, in the long run, help me be a better guest, be better at being welcomed, and thus more faithful to the work to which I am called by this text.

I'll be honest, there's never a day that I'm stoked about this opportunity to practice discomfort. There are some days I'm tolerant of it, and that's about as far as it goes. But considering how long I have had the privilege of being comfortable in churches and others have not, I will lean into this discomfort for as long as it takes, so that Christ can be present.

And, here's the good news in this. Good news that I'd never noticed until this week is really the overarching theme of the entire Gospel of Matthew. There are two commissionings in Matthew's Gospel, two times in which Jesus sends his disciples out to do his work in the world. There is the missionary discourse, which we have been reading through this month, and there is the Great Commission, which we started the month with. Remember back to June 7<sup>th</sup> when Jesus, just like at the beginning of the Missionary Discourse, sent the disciples out to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." And then it ended, not just the reading, but the entire Gospel of Matthew, with this promise from Jesus, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Friends the work before us is hard. Welcoming is hard, being welcomed is even harder. It will require us to give up our positions of control and enter into the trust of another. But the promise of this and every single other thing Christ calls us to is this, Christ is with us always, to the end of the age, no matter what. Thanks be to God. Amen.