

June 28, 2020

For the last few Sundays, our gospel readings have come from the 10th chapter of Matthew. Jesus encounters crowds of people who are harassed and helpless, he is moved with compassion, overwhelmed by the need, and he initiates that first mission trip. It is started out of love...

Jesus calls the disciples together, he names them, he gives them instructions, warns them about persecution, reflects on the cost of discipleship, and then we have our reading for today... Jesus ends the missionary training by talking about welcome and hospitality...

Today, I'd like to do some reflecting on welcoming. How do we experience "Welcoming" in our lives?

Welcoming is really a posture of openness. It's being vulnerable to another person, it's extending our hand, it's learning about another person, it's caring about another person... In our two congregations, I think we do a fantastic job of welcoming! It's just a part of our DNA. It was a value we learned when we were young, and we just continue to live by it...

And personally, as the recipient of welcome many years ago by Shirley and Alvie, I can tell you, welcoming has the power to change lives.

There are many people in our congregations who notice when there are new people amongst us, and they go out of their way to greet them, meet them and make them feel comfortable. To get to know them...

This is a gift that many of you have, and I really appreciate it! For some of us, welcoming comes naturally... We all have different spiritual gifts; "welcoming others" is one of them. Some of you are really good at it... And I suspect you know if you have that gift or not. I'm not so sure if that is one of my spiritual gifts, but it is something I work on...

That's why in the body of Christ it's important that we all have different gifts. And it's the Holy Spirit that orchestrates them all of them, for the common good...

Now, our Gospel reading talks about welcoming in a different way than we traditionally think about it. The disciples are not welcoming the people, but rather the opposite. Our Gospel reading is focused on the welcome that is extended to the disciples. This is a different direction... Perhaps we could say the welcoming is about how the people welcome the disciples into their lives and literally into their homes.

Quick story... Many years ago, when I worked in Cannon, I often bought gas in Miesville. One afternoon I was filling my car, and Bill walked over. Not his real name... I didn't see where he came from, he must have parked at Dave's Tire store. We started making small talk. We had a lot of mutual friends, so it's likely he knew I was in Seminary at the time.

Suddenly, in midst of all our small talk, the conversation changed dramatically. Bill had just lost his wife to cancer. And right then, right there, I heard the whole story from beginning to end. Surprisingly and suddenly he had welcomed me into his life and his pain...

My heart went out to him; he was a lost soul... He confessed, he didn't know what to do with his time... He couldn't sleep... His schedule was a mess... He was a little disoriented... We must have stood there at the gas pump for half hour, maybe forty-five minutes? I promised to keep him in my prayers... The conversation was an amazing and sacred encounter! He thanked me profusely for giving him the time and just listening to him...

He had welcomed me into his grieving world. For some reason he trusted me, and it was not about fixing him, it was all about being genuinely present to his suffering-- acknowledging it, validating it... I entered the pain with him, and that meant a lot. In some small way that was healing for him.

As the disciples go out on their mission trip, they are present to the pain of others and they bring healing with them. They are on a mission to be welcomed into the lives of others.

This kind of welcome is about relationship and healing. It is a posture to being present to the pain of others. And this is not hocus pocus wave the magic-wand kind of healing; this is deeply connecting, soul-healing... When the entire world seems to be against you, having even just one person listening and caring, makes all the difference in the world.

Jesus said, whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcome me, welcomes the One who sent me. At its core, it is deeply relational, deeply connected... The disciples are grounded in love. Moved by compassion to be present to the suffering they will encounter and be welcomed into. And healing happens... Ministry happens... Wholeness happens...

Jesus uses an interesting term to describe the disciples; he calls them the "little ones." I think this is an affectionate, and descriptive title!

Think about this for a moment. These disciples are not the rocket scientists of their day. And I kind of get it, I grew up on a farm in the middle of "no-where" Minnesota... These disciples

probably have fisherman tans, smell a little funny and they probably talk good! Maybe they don't have a Minnesota accent... But you know, my kind of people!

Truth is-- they are the most ordinary, common, down to earth people you can possibly imagine... They didn't go to Seminary... They weren't rich... They weren't famous... But there they are... bringing what they got and going on that mission trip.

These disciples are really you and me. We continue on that same mission trip... In all our ordinariness, every time we are welcomed into the pain of others. Every time we listen to each other, love and support each other, we are connected to that ministry of healing.

The good news today is that through our Baptism, God is continually welcoming us into this thing called the Kingdom. And because he has chosen us, we live in confidence of His love and forgiveness. God is in a permanent posture of welcoming, always, reaching down to us...

And there are times when we encounter brokenness and hardship, and God is always there with infinite grace and patience to hold our hand and listen to our pain. And because God listens to us, we also listen to each other. Because God welcomes us, we welcome each other...

And all together, God has blessed us richly, and welcome to the Kingdom...

Amen...

