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Matthew 10:40-42
"Welcome"

A sudden storm and cloudburst fell upon a newly wedded couple on a remote country road. Unable to go any further, they got out of their car and walled through mud to an old farmhouse. They saw a light in the window. By the time they reached the farmhouse, there was an elderly couple there waiting for them with a kerosene lamp. They had seen them from the window.

Meeting them at the door the young couple explained their predicament and asked, "Could you please put us up for the night? Any place on the floor, a mat or something, would do just fine." As he was speaking, a few grains of rice fell from the little hairpiece the bride had on. The elderly couple exchanged knowing glances and said, "By all means. Certainly. You can have the guest room."

So the newlyweds used the guest room that night. They got up early, not wishing to disturb the elderly couple. They got dressed, and the man left a 10 dollar bill on the dresser. They came out of the bedroom, there sleeping on the couch was the husband and crumpled up on a chair was his wife. The newly married couple realized that this poor couple had no guest room.

The young couple received a royal welcome. I'm sure it would have an unalterable influence on them for the rest of their lives. They learned the value of welcome. Jesus valued "welcome." He speaks about it a lot in the gospels and especially in the passage just read by Elein where we see a train of "welcome."

"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."

The newly weds encountered Jesus and God in the elderly couple. Jesus invites the disciples to discover their stories of welcome and in doing so invites us to tell our stories of welcome

Recently I visited a member of the church and noticed as I stepped onto a couple of levels before entering the front door that there was a welcome mat on each level. I had the sense of being doubly welcomed in this home. And indeed I was welcomed and in so being welcomed Jesus and God were welcomed in that home.

To say that Jesus and God are welcomed when people welcome us might be saying a lot but since Jesus says it in the gospel today we accept it – and it happens in ordinary and extraordinary stories of welcome.

Suellen and I visited Belgium, England and South Africa last year and we were amazed with the amazing welcome we received in each home. The Belgium welcome came with the best Belgium beers and chocolates. Best of all was the love and caring of each host.

In each case Jesus and God were welcomed and it did not matter that almost every host was atheist or agnostic. Many conversations revolved around theology and religion – it comes with the territory – making Jesus and God absolutely present. We didn't convert the philosophies or perspectives of our friends but hopefully we left them with things to think about and with the love we feel for all of them. They left us with things to think about and they cared for us.

I'm making reference to my going out because this gospel text is about "welcome" from the perspective of Christians going out to encounter the world. It's an intriguing perspective of how people welcome us when we visit them. If they welcome us they welcome Jesus and God. If they don't, we move on.

So far, I've addressed going out in more a general way since I believe before anything this passage is about "welcome" in a general sense and then in a specific sense. After all, there are six mentions of the word "welcome" in sharp succession.

In a closer reading of the text in its context we see that Jesus is more intentional or expansive about the kind of visits we make and the resultant welcome. He is sending his disciples on a mission to proclaim the good news that the realm of God has come near, to cure every disease and every sickness, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. It's a tough mission.

Jesus continues: "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me... Have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known."

It is then that Jesus says, "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."

Now, the "welcome" makes more sense. Now, we are in places where we might not be welcomed. Take for instance, ministries of raising the dead. What is dead in society and needs raising? Is it our education system, our healthcare system, our justice system, the way government operates in Washington?

The latest "The Nation" magazine (June 27, 2011) takes on Democrats and Republicans in an article "Reimagining Capitalism." It states that "falling wages and surplus labor, swelling trade deficits and foreign indebtedness, deepening inequality and the steady destruction of the broad middle class – the political system does not have an answer for any of these."

We might be convinced as a church or as individual Christians that any or all of these systems need to be raised to new levels. And when we try to raise the dead there might be those who would not welcome our intentions. But if they welcome us Jesus and God will be welcomed. This does not mean we are right. It's based on the premise that dialogue is better than no dialogue. Engagement is key and when we address and welcome issues of concern that affect the real lives of people then God and Jesus are welcomed.

Jesus adds two dimensions to the ministry of his disciples. He figures that some will be perceived as prophets and others as righteous. Righteous is another word for justice. The prophets are like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos who turn spiritually wayward people back into relationship with God and along with the righteous ones address issues of peace and justice.

Isaiah proclaims: "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." (42:6-7) and Amos: "...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (5:24).

These prophets and righteous ones will analyze the sicknesses and diseases, the demons and lepers in society. There was a time when people with living cancer and HIV/AIDS were regarded as lepers.

Fortunately, the developed world has moved beyond these stereotypes but not all the world has. People are still ostracized for having HIV/AIDS in certain parts of the world and when prophets of health and healing visit these areas they are not always welcomed. Jeremiah was thrown in jail. But if they are welcomed, according to Jesus, then those who welcome receive their reward.

Jesus wants his people to go out and do the tough stuff to make this a better world and he hopes that his people are welcomed.

While he encourages us to look from the perspective of those going out and be those going out he also expects us to welcome his people and prophets visiting us. It's a welcoming notion to know that we serve a God of welcome. Amen.