

“Message Sent”

Sunday, July 2nd, 2017

4th Sunday after Pentecost

 **Matthew 10:40-42 (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.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

Lutheran pastor Elisabeth Johnson tells the story of a member of her church who described an interaction with the bagger at her grocery store.

She had been talking with this woman off and on for a year, and upon learning that she no longer worked on Sundays, invited her to come to her church, to their casual, outdoor, come-as-you-are service.

Much to the woman's surprise, the clerk responded by giving her a big hug.

We may not always receive such a positive response when we take the risk of reaching out, yet we may be surprised at how ready many are to receive our most humble efforts.

Let us not forget what we have to offer; we have Jesus' promise: "*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.*"

Let us pray...

Lord, we know that you have called us to reach out to others and invite them in. We know that you

challenge us to be welcoming to strangers who need and seek you. Sometimes we are reluctant to share ourselves and we come today so that you might inspire us with your Word. Lead us to be courageous Christians. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

This passage from Matthew's gospel marks the end of an extended discourse on discipleship and mission.

Over the past couple weeks, we have been looking at some of what Matthew chose to share about Jesus' teaching on the topic.

It is clear that Jesus calls us to do more than just sit in church once a week.

Jesus sends us out to deliver his message of love, forgiveness, and grace.

As he concludes this conversation, Jesus then reminds us that, once the message is delivered, we are obligated to welcome those who respond.

We've all heard the stories of people who have visited churches and felt unwelcome for one reason or another.

There are the reported “experiments” where a pastor has dressed as a homeless person to see how the church will relate to him.

There are stories where people of color are ignored or asked to leave all-white churches.

There’s the story of the elderly matriarch of the church who enters, only to find “her pew” occupied by a visitor. She hits the man with her cane and tells him to move out of her pew.

And there can be many, more subtle ways that make people feel unwelcome.

Access may be too difficult to accommodate their physical needs.

Their best clothes don’t seem good enough when compared to what they see around the room.

Nobody greets them or offers assistance finding their way around.

The truth is, in most of our social interactions, we define our boundaries in some way.

While none may be turned away, we will tell ourselves that we simply have more in common with those who are like us.

The curiosity will vary, from questions about the neighborhood you live in, to the clubs you belong to, and even the schools your children attend.

All these are the subject of normal, polite conversation; *are we really judging?*

After all, will the uneducated truly feel uncomfortable in our church?

Will the less wealthy feel uncomfortable in another church?

Is there a dominant social or political perspective that one really needs to subscribe to, and that will prompt the community to be more open to the newcomer?

Is there clarity about the norm for sexual identity or family model that really must be established

before the doors of the church are flung wide open in welcome?

This gospel lesson invites us to ask all of these questions about the quality of the welcome that we offer to one another within the Body of Christ, the church.

It further suggests that, while we may find a reward in gathering only with those whose names sound like our names, or whose education or bank accounts resemble ours, there is a cost to the kinds of exclusive behavior that too many churches have tolerated for too long.

Jesus seeks to remind us here that, whenever we welcome a stranger, someone different from us, someone whose needs we place above our own, THEN we welcome Christ himself into our space.

Underlying this message is that those whom Christ sends – us, the church – will also depend on the hospitality of others as we go about doing the mission of Christ.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

You see, in ancient communities, it was understood that in showing hospitality, one welcomed not just an individual, but implicitly, the community who sent the person and all that they represent.

Welcoming a disciple of Jesus would mean receiving the very presence of Jesus and the one who sent him, God the Father.

Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger; welcome the one whose life we hardly understand, ***not to change them***, but *simply* because **they too are God’s**.

This is key for me in this text.

We are not called to convert everyone to our way of thinking; we are called to welcome everyone and let **God convert them to God’s way of thinking**.

One of the biggest obstacles we have to overcome as disciples is the **past**.

So many people have been hurt by the church,
rejected by the church, or completely shut out
of the church.

So many have been made to feel unwelcome and
so, have never returned to hear the message of
Jesus.

Are they somehow now willing to sing our song of
faith?

Can we expect them to be willing to risk
approaching church doors that were previously
closed to them?

I don't think so and that is why we can no longer
expect people to flock to our doorstep simply
because we are here.

There is a growing awareness that mission is not just
another church program.

It is – OR SHOULD BE – the defining purpose of
the church.

Since **The Great Commission**, we have been a
“sent church”.

Certainly, we are not all sent to be wandering missionaries, depending on others for shelter and sustenance.

That does not let us off the hook, however.

All the baptized are sent to carry Christ to others with humility and vulnerability, being willing to risk rejection.

Each one of us, regardless of our age or abilities, is sent by God to share the Good News and invite others to come in and learn more.

What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come, on their own initiative, through our church doors on Sunday mornings?

What would it look like if we took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them?

What would happen if we truly believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighborhood we enter?

What would change if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love for the neighbor?

Think back to the story we heard at the beginning of this about the lady at the grocery store.

How much extra effort did it really take for that customer to pay attention to the cashier?

Was it difficult for her to be nice and listen to what the other had to say?

Did the little extra time it took really have an impact on her "busy schedule"?

I don't think so.

The reward for her effort was a hug from a grateful neighbor who was treated with respect and hospitality.

The really good news in this passage is for the church, who has, to one degree or another, guarded the door from strangers.

Jesus insists that, although we might pretend otherwise, we are not the gate-keepers of the community of God.

That is not our job.

Our work is to invite and welcome; to offer an embrace when embrace is invited; and to give a cup of cool water for a hot summer day.

Our work is to remain welcoming as we build relationships with those we have invited.

Our work is to help them find their way into relationship with our saving Lord.

Our work must recognize our limitations and allow God to do God's work without our interference.

Our reward, Jesus says, will be full indeed.

The message of Jesus Christ has been sent and **we** are the messengers.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**