

July 2, 2017, 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Click [here](#) to view readings.

Focus: Christ makes us welcome.

“Go in peace. Serve the Lord.”

“Welcoming People in Christ, Caring, Sharing, Serving.”

Now, don't leave, we're not done yet! Probably when you hear that tagline “Welcoming People in Christ,” you think of the end of the service.

But of course, there's a reason that “Welcoming People in Christ: Caring, Sharing, Serving” is at the end of our service. It is our mission statement. Welcoming, then, is part of who we are. We welcome neighbors to Lenten lunches, to Germanfests, to food pantries, and to yard sales.

More than that, we welcome one another. If you've ever had one of those “Mondays,” how nice it is just to sit down at Shipley's at 7pm and be welcomed by your church family to a pint of Amber Bock? Or to be invited to the Reeses' new swimming pool for the choir party and even to get to ride on a giant inflatable pink flamingo? Or after a long week to come into church and see your church friends smiling and greeting you with a hug or a handshake? And I don't need to say how much it means to get that phone call or that hug from your church family after you've gone through a loss in your personal or family life.

Jesus talks a lot in the Gospels about welcoming others. Later he will say, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” But today he is talking about you. He is talking about **you being welcomed**.

This story is not about **our** hospitality. It's not even about **God's** hospitality—well, actually, we'll come back to that in about 6 minutes. It's about **our neighbors'** hospitality. And even more than that, it's about **strangers'** hospitality. It's about how when we “go in peace and serve the Lord,” we ourselves are welcomed by friends, by acquaintances, and by complete strangers.

This story comes in the middle of Jesus talking about discipleship, and, to be honest, discipleship sounds really hard. The first part of discipleship is that you have to get out. Out of your home. Out of your comfort zone. And yes, God forbid, even out of this blessed, air-conditioned church building. To be a disciple means sharing the Good News with others who haven't heard it. It means sharing the Good News with strangers, by your actions, and yes, by your words. Now that's a really uncomfortable thing to do. You risk rejection or being categorized as a “holly roller.”

More than that, when you share the Good News with strangers, people you grew up with might reject you. Jesus was often rejected because he spoke to Samaritans, or to women, or to tax collectors, to sinners, people who were not welcome at the time, people who were strangers. In our day, it's not hard to think of groups of people who are unwelcome, who are excluded from the church, from our circle of friends, or even outright banned from the country. A Gospel that is so much about loving the stranger is going to ruffle the feathers of those who are most familiar to us, even our fellow churchgoers, friends, and family. Maybe that's why Jesus said last week

that his message would turn mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, father against son. We are called to this strange discipleship, and Jesus doesn't sugarcoat it: discipleship has a cost.

Yesterday, I ran the Firecracker 10k. Now the weather wasn't as barbaric as it could have been, but it's still really hard to run 6 miles in the July heat. Your legs begin to ache, around mile 3, your tummy begins to ask hard and pointed questions about what you ate for dinner last night, and salty sweat is streaming down your hair and into your eyes and places on your body you didn't even know you had. This is a hard thing. But all along the way, there are people cheering for you. There are people running with you. There are even people who—as Jesus says—offer you a cup of cold water not only when you've finished the race, but along the way. These volunteers, spectators, and fellow runners—90% of whom—even in the small town of Madison—are **strangers**—they make what could be a sweaty, achy, medieval exercise in torture not only tolerable, but a joy.

Now think about discipleship. You see we're not the only important characters here. The strangers have a role to play, too. Strangers are more than some mission for us as disciples. They are real people God has brought us to who welcome us as we share the Good News. They play an essential part because no one can go through this life alone, and no one can be a solo disciple either. Remember the firefighters we met at God's Work, Our Hands last year? We went around with our prayers and our cookies, and they took us in, made us feel like we were doing something worthwhile and important, offered us not only water but grilled food; they even let the kids and one pastor play around on the fire engine. **They welcomed us.**

When have you felt welcomed by a stranger? Was it when the car broke down in the middle of what you call "nowhere" and they call "home?" Was it the first day at the new school or on the new job when a stranger welcomed you, introduced you to people, and showed you the ropes? Was it when you met your new boyfriend or girlfriend's family for the first time and in that awkward, unfamiliar, strangeness, someone there took you in? It is amazing the difference being welcomed can make. It takes you from an outsider to an insider. From alone to part of the family. From us vs. them to all together.

Jesus's lesson then today is Good News. It tells us that in those scary, uncomfortable, awkward times of discipleship, the strangers have a role to play. Jesus says that when we share the Good News, there are people there to welcome us in, people who may be strangers at first, but who then become something more. It's out of these strange relationships, that God's family is built, that we find in the stranger no longer someone unknown, but a brother or sister in Christ.

Being welcomed by strangers means we change where put our trust. We can't rely on ourselves for everything. We have to trust the people we meet. If I see a stranger as a host, it changes the way I look at them. They have a new worth, not as a stranger who needs me, but someone I myself need in order to be a disciple. I need their hospitality, their welcome. And they need us to share with them the Good News about Christ Jesus we have first received. In this passage, Jesus is not just talking about preaching the Good News or giving a cup of water. He's not talking about transactions. But he is talking about how community is created. He is talking about turning the missionary disciple into a guest and the stranger into a host. He is talking about taking strangers who may seem to have nothing in common and bringing them together into a new family.

We know that family. It is called the church. Jesus, it turns out, is the greatest host of all. It is in this place that all of us have felt the greatest welcome of all. Every Sunday we come to this stop on the road, this place on our journey. We come dirty with sin and the cares of the world, and he washes us clean in the waters of baptism. We come hungry and he feeds us simple gifts of bread and wine. We come not knowing which way to go next, and he speaks to us in his Gospel with words of comfort and purpose. We come in that we may go out in peace to serve him. We come as strangers, but we leave as children of God and friends.

To Jesus, there are no strangers. Whether you are the most stalwart disciple or the shyest outsider, Jesus loves you and has a purpose for you in his mission here on earth. You are very welcome here and in his house. To him, everyone has a role to play, from the bold Christian announcing, “The kingdom of heaven has come near!” to the meek nonbeliever, “can I get you a cup of water?” Christ’s love is what brings us together. He died for the disciple and the stranger alike, and we are all welcomed home at the foot of his cross. **Amen.**