

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 8
Year A

Whom Ought I Welcome?

[RCL:] Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

“Jesus said, ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’”

Just so we get this straight: whoever welcomes you welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes your friend or neighbor or family member or work colleague or elected official or mother-in-law or next door neighbor or chatty seat companion on an airplane or vendor at the state fair or grocery checker or barber or the UPS driver or the kid who hit your new car with a soccer ball...and so on and so forth...welcomes God? We could have fun with this! But would there ever be an end to such a list of those who are welcome? If there *is* an end to such a list of who is welcome, what does this mean? And if *not*, well- what does *that* mean?

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes any one of us welcomes Jesus, welcomes God.

The message we hear in this morning’s gospel reading from Matthew was important enough to Jesus and to the early church that some variation on this theme shows up in each gospel, and often more than once. Also in Matthew’s gospel from chapter 18 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...” and from chapter 25 “The king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me.’” Mark includes similar verses. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus declares that “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” The Jesus in John’s gospel, in true poetic style, declares in chapter 13 “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

There are numerous other examples and variations throughout the New Testament record. The bottom line emphasis seems to be on inclusion, reciprocity, welcome and doing for others—all those things it takes to build up community, to include the stranger as neighbor. If we can believe the record of today’s lesson and so many other passages, Jesus and the early disciples and later apostles put a high value on welcoming and proclaiming the presence of God thereby.

Pause for a moment and think about what we’ve been hearing through all the election drama and to the present day about division, exclusion, keeping people separated, kicking people out.

There may be legitimate and compelling reasons to consider the economic impact or national safety issues in such things, but if an inhospitable, exclusive attitude goes along with these ideas, then they are antithetical to the teachings of Jesus who talked so very much about welcome, inclusion, hospitality.

Hospitality is a primary ethic of the cultures and peoples of the Middle East even now. Whether one is brought into a family home of Muslims, Christians or Jews, there is joy in welcoming, there is the belief that it is desired of God, the welcoming of strangers who are strangers no longer, but beloved friends, believing that in welcoming people into one's home they are earning their crown in heaven, doing as God would have them do in welcoming the living God among us.

Such an understanding of hospitality, of the obligation of welcome, dates back to well before the time of Jesus. It was a matter of survival and community health which translated into the religious understanding of what God wants of us. Where and how do we experience such welcome today?

“Jesus said, ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’”

Is this what we hear? Or do we hear, instead, words of separation, words of breaking relationship, words of opposition and repudiation?

So many of the ugly attitudes playing out on the world stage and in the evening news have spilled over into our popular culture, showing up in a variety of television shows with comments about the increase in bullying not only among children in our schools, but flowing out into our neighborhoods, showing up in stepped-up immigration strictures and deportation raids, among other things.

Where is our witness to welcoming others, and thereby welcoming Jesus and the one who sent him?

This Sunday falls between two other occasions marked on the Church calendar: the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul last Thursday, and our celebration of American Independence on the Fourth of July on Tuesday.

It is important to note this for a number of reasons. First, think about Peter and Paul. They did not agree on many things, didn't get along at all, and finally went their separate ways in the proclamation of the Gospel. Peter insisted that the early believers must follow Jewish ways, must be circumcised, must hold to the Law. Paul's vision led him to distant lands proclaiming faith in a risen Christ and urging believers to conform their lives to that faith. What they had in common, though, was the conviction that God had visited humanity in Jesus, and that Jesus had brought something new and remarkable to humankind demonstrated in a way to live, a way to relate and a way to witness to God's love. And they both understood that the welcome of God was an invitation to a place in God's kingdom.

As we celebrate this Fourth of July, and as we sing *God Bless America*, and as we roast hot dogs and hamburgers and marvel at fireworks and the good ol' red, white and blue, let us also ask ourselves what Jesus meant in telling us over and over again, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matthew 10:40).

We may believe differently about the details of faith, as Peter and Paul certainly did and as Christians are wont to do. We may understand civic responsibility differently; Americans have always held a variety of opinions on things.

But for us as Christian Americans or American Christians, the question of the day growing out of this gospel text asks: What does it mean to welcome, and how do we do that? What does it look like in our churches, in our neighborhoods, in our national policies, in our very attitudes? For we are Christians first, as citizens of God's kingdom, living that faith in an American context of privilege and challenge.

Jesus didn't say that we have to agree on everything, but he pretty clearly told us to be welcoming. Like Peter and Paul, we won't all agree on everything. And as Americans, we will stand proudly to celebrate on the Fourth. When we put all that together, one possible outcome is that we may have to agree to disagree on some aspects of American policy as we live our Christian faith in daily practice.

Christian people are called to be welcoming, for in welcoming others we welcome God. Can we at least agree on that?

As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, when we welcome strangers, we may be entertaining angels unaware. AMEN.

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