

Pentecost 7, Proper 8, 6/29/08 Matthew 10: 40-42; Randall Prior

### Prayer

The gospels for the last few weeks have been taken from Matthew 10:5-42 which is a missionary discourse and a warning of Jesus to the disciples on the cost of discipleship.

We have had a lot of long gospels in the recent past and today we have what is surely one of the shortest, only three verses long which is the end of the missionary discourse. But, don't overlook the significance of these verses because of their brevity. The question they pose is simply this: "what does it mean to welcome someone in the name of the Lord?" This is not about a social ritual or pleasantries but more about profound hospitality, assistance, meeting people where they are in life or at their point of need.

One of the things that is most different in our own time from the biblical context is the fact that we live in a culture in which individuality and individualism is a prime value. In fact it is carried to an extreme in many cases in ways which may be detrimental. Community often takes a back seat to the individual and individual desires. In the first century there was not nearly so much of a sense of the individual because people's identity was much more associated with the group of which they were a part. This could be defined ethnically, culturally, politically, or religiously or by gender. The group you belonged to was central to who you were. What this meant was that when an individual welcomed another individual the meaning had more to do with a group welcoming

another group or identity. This is why gospel events such as the Good Samaritan story or the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well have some shock value and take on a special meaning. Samaritans and pious Jews weren't supposed to interact or get involved with each other. Men and women weren't supposed to share casual dialogue. One's actions reflected on them as individuals but also reflected the intention of the group of which they are a part. Many of us were perhaps raised with a sense of family that had some of that dynamic to it. What you do reflects on your home and relatives. This may still be truer today than we recognize although often overcome by our desire to do our own thing and take everyone as only reflective of themselves and not accountable to what they are part of.

The second thing about the gospel concept of welcome is that it involves a gracious and lavish reaching out that is sincere and persistent. This is not a simple "nice to see you," or nice to have you here but a rolling out the red carpet kind of hospitable self giving kind of welcome that is clearly a rejoicing in someone's presence. The Bible is full of examples of what welcome means for the sojourner and the stranger in your midst. We had an example of that a couple of weeks ago in the Genesis account of Abraham and Sara entertaining the three divine emissaries unaware, and receiving God's promise of a child. In the Middle East especially the standards of welcome and hospitality are very high to this day and it is that which lies at the heart of welcome. It is not based on one's acceptability but on one's presence and being. People are not always easy to welcome and some people are downright hard to welcome or accept (especially

annoying prophets which the gospel specifically names). Welcome is blind to the worthiness or acceptability of a person to us, or whether we agree with them.

Some of you may remember the old Tony Orlando song “Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.” That song was inspired by the story of a convict who was paroled after four years in prison. His wife had not been in touch with him for three and one half years. He wrote her that he still loved her and to make it easy for them both he asked her to tie a yellow handkerchief on an oak tree near their home. He was taking the bus home and if he saw the ribbon he would get off the bus and if not he would just keep on going. He shared this story with a bunch of college kids riding the bus with him on his return and they all looked expectantly out of the window to see the oak tree covered with yellow handkerchiefs. That is the heart of welcome—gracious, unmerited, lavish, redeeming. Isn’t that the kind of welcome you would like to receive? And what kind do you want to give?

The third thing about welcome when it comes to this gospel is what might be referred to as agency. When a person encounters a disciple of Jesus they encountered Jesus himself. The point is often made that the gospel is not communicated propositionally but relationally. Propositions don’t speak much to the heart but how people regard and treat us do. Propositions didn’t nurture or care for us as children, or support us through the trials of life, or pray us through the crises. People present with welcome and care do. As Christians we are agents of Christ and it is our work to gracefully express Christ in our lives and relationships. This is the sacred responsibility

that is ours in faith. We are called to be agents of grace and welcome in the lives of others both those we find acceptable and attractive and those we don't.

The Ad Council has a series of TV spots in what is called the Generous Nation campaign. One shows three children in a car, two asleep in the back seat and one in the front staring sadly into space. The parents stand outside the car in a driving rain. The announcer says in the back ground, "This is the family that was almost fed by neighbors who almost volunteered." In another a man on crutches is seen from the rear making his way up a flight of stairs. The announcer says: "This is a man who almost learned to walk, at a rehab center that almost got built, by people who almost gave money."

How often in our lives does welcome turn into missed opportunity. Our intentions are good but in the busyness of life and the press of INDIVIDUAL needs we just don't seem to get around to it. The person we thought about offering a meal or going to visit in need, the slot at the homeless shelter or soup kitchen we thought about filling are the "almosts" of our lives.

We are today surrounded by people in financial crisis with homes lost or threatened with foreclosure. There are people sick or injured or in relational distress or just need a little concern and time from us. That is the heart of and the opportunity for welcome, and we are the agents of a loving and welcoming savior who bids us to go offer the ministry of presence and the balm of food and water.

The Ad council's spots end with these words, "When it comes to giving, almost doesn't count." We might paraphrase that saying, "When it comes to welcome, almost

doesn't count." As agents of Christ and recipients of abundant love and grace our commission is to pass it on abundantly, sacrificially, lovingly.

AMEN