

“What it Means to Welcome”

Matthew 10:40-42

In case you weren't counting, in three verses, the word “welcome” occurs six times...four of those times in one verse - verse 40, which seems to be a logic puzzle that perhaps unlocks a new lesson in this text for us.

In verse 40, Jesus uses what's called a syllogism. If you remember Philosophy 101, you'll remember that a syllogism is a logical form of argument that has three parts:

1. If A then B.
2. If B then C.
3. Therefore, if A then C.¹

In other words, the conclusion is not stated explicitly, but it becomes clear when you put together the first two statements.

The logic in Matthew 10:40, then, is as follows:

1. If someone welcomes you, that person is welcoming me (Jesus).
2. If someone welcomes me (Jesus), that person is welcoming the one who sent me (God).
3. Implied conclusion: If someone

welcomes you, that person is welcoming the one who sent me (God).

Have I lost anyone yet?

According to Jesus, in this account from Matthew, *what it means to welcome other folks* and *what it means to be welcomed by other folks* has everything to do with the fact that God, via Jesus, wants to be behind every encounter of welcome...or maybe even, out in front of every encounter of welcome...and if not out in front...then certainly *within* every encounter of welcome...within the exchange of greeting, which, when God is present...really is an exchange of grace.

Welcoming is about *giving* and *receiving* the presence of Christ...it's about the hospitality of God...which is extravagant for sure...but it's not always as easy as we'd like it to be.

There is a complexity to “welcoming,” and it's complex because to allow oneself to be vulnerable enough *to be the one welcomed* into a strange place - and not just always be the one doing the welcoming within our own place, our own home, our own church, etc. –

¹ Jeremy Pierce, *Jesus' Reasoning in Matthew 10:40-42*, “Parableman” Blog” (15 January 2005, 6:08pm). Accessed on 25 June 2011 at http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2005/01/jesus_reasoning_3.html.

well, that can be hard, and humbling.

But that is what this text is about – not necessarily us welcoming others (although that *is* important – we just had a forum on that very topic this morning); but rather this text is about *allowing ourselves to be welcomed into contexts and situations and relationships that make us uncomfortable*, perhaps, because they are *unfamiliar*.

This text comes at the end of Matthew chapter 10; it's the second major section of Jesus' teaching after the Sermon on the Mount. The chapters in between the Sermon on the Mount and today's text (chapters 8-9) tell us about various episodes in Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, casting out demons, and raising the dead. At the end of chapter 9, Jesus looks at the crowds and has compassion on them because they are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). So seeing a need, Jesus tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37-38). And the text doesn't say this...but we assume that the disciples did just this...that they prayed to the Lord to send some laborers into his harvest.

But as we keep reading, we discover that Jesus evidently intended *these* very disciples to be the answer to their

own prayer, because at the beginning of chapter 10, he is sending them out, giving them "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness" (10:1).

The disciples are to act as *envoys* (messengers, representatives) of Jesus, extending his ministry, proclaiming the same good news and performing the same works of healing that he is doing.

Jesus' further instructions make clear that the disciples are also to share in his poverty and homelessness, taking with them no money or extra clothing, and depending solely on the hospitality of others for shelter and sustenance (10:8b-13). They will not be welcomed everywhere (10:14-15), and they can expect to experience the same hostility Jesus often does, for he is sending them out "like sheep into the midst of wolves" (10:16). They can expect to encounter persecution and trials (10:17-23), and they need also be prepared for painful division within families, and to be willing to put Jesus' mission above family loyalties (10:34-38).²

All of this comes before we get to

² Elizabeth Johnson, "Matthew 10:40-42: Commentary on Gospel" *Working Preacher.org Website by Luther Seminary* (posted for 26 June 2011). Accessed on 25 June 2011 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/26/2011&tab=4.

verse 40 about “welcoming.” If you didn’t know the context, our little passage today can seem quite benign. We could gloss over it as something that sounds pretty, but not put a lot of thought into what it means. But when we put it in context...we see that it turns “*what we usually think it means to welcome*” on its head.

We usually think of welcoming as an act *we* extend to *others*...even here at Calvary, right?

Mason Brown coordinates an entire excel spread sheet of greeters...who extend a first word of welcome to all who walk through the doors here.

Bill Ponikvar invites folks to join him at the “Welcome Kiosk” to extend a greeting and help us all make a nametag if we don’t already have one, and he also talks to folks to find out a little more about us, visitors and members alike, and to help all of us find the information we need about what’s going on at Calvary.

Karen Bennett and Mae Finney help coordinate our ushers...who welcome us into the sanctuary with an order of service and a smile. And who have welcomed us into this space by doing things like lighting the candles on the chancel, turning on the baptistery light, putting water here on the pulpit...all acts of welcoming and hospitality that “make worship happen” before perhaps, you even

walk into this space.

And then the ushers pass out loaves of bread as a gift of welcome - a gift that Jackie Howard has coordinated with all of you out there who bake.

And *you yourselves* continue to extend this welcome when you wear your name tag (you’re wearing it not because *you* want to, but because it helps *other people*) or when you choose to sit with someone you don’t recognize or don’t know instead of sitting in your usual pew with the usual people.

Here at Calvary – we have quite an extensive network of “welcoming” in place...and that’s just getting in the door!

Our newly formed Membership Committee is working diligently and creatively at trying to figure out how we extend that great welcome we offer to first time guests...to those who come back again...a second or third time: How can our church school system be more welcoming? How can we help folks get plugged in so that we welcome folks not just in word but also with intentional and on-going efforts?

Calvary we are working, always, at becoming a welcoming community of Christ that experiences and shares God’s love.

But if we listen to what Jesus is

saying here...we see that the kind of welcome he is talking about is not the kind of welcome that happens on our own turf, within these walls. The welcome Jesus talks about here happens when we are sent out from here...to places beyond what we know...and when we put ourselves in the position of *being the ones to receive hospitality*. What do we learn about God when all the sudden what we thought we knew is challenged because of having to *rely on others* and not ourselves? Well, a lot, actually.

Our youth are doing just this...learning to rely on others for basic shelter and showers and food as they make their way to Green Lake, Wisconsin. I got a voicemail from Joe Greemore on Friday, saying that the youth were doing some really challenging work in downtown Omaha...and hadn't had showers in a couple days...but weren't complaining...they were working away. But - they were looking forward to staying in host homes...so they could get a shower! However staying in host homes is not always easy to do...because it's a stranger's house. And as one who went on many a youth choir tour growing up - I have many a story I could tell about my "host home experiences." Some were better than others. But regardless, a hot shower is a hot shower.

I read this post on *Facebook* this

morning from Heather Michel, one of the youth on the trip:

Its 12:30 am here in ohio..im sleeping in a strangers house.but on the plus side i slipped and fell in some mud...[and finally] got to get clean

Pretty well stated. The plus side of hospitality can sometimes be as simple as a hot shower...giving or receiving that. As our youth receive that gift (a hot shower)...we here at Calvary are offering that gift (a hot shower) to our IHN families this week as they stay in our building. It's a nice give and take there...which is the way it needs to be.

But most churches, like us, spend a lot of time figuring out how to welcome folks when they come to us on Sunday mornings, but don't spend nearly enough time preparing for the humility and courage and vulnerability it takes to be welcomed into another's home...whether that's going to a foreign country on a mission trip or into the home of a Calvary member that thinks quite differently than we do. **To receive hospitality is to relinquish control.** Easier said than done.

Five or six summers ago - I learned, perhaps the hard way, but in a good way, what it means to truly receive hospitality...to be welcomed...as a stranger.

I was traipsing around Italy (after 3 weeks in Israel, and then 3 weeks in Italy) and on my

last afternoon in Florence – my wallet, passport, plane tickets and everything of any value to me in a foreign country – was stolen. How you ask? Story for another day.

Regardless of how it happened - I could not fly back to Boston the next day as I had planned – I could not register at a hotel (in Europe you have to have your passport to stay at a hotel, and my Xeroxed copy didn't work) – I did not even have one dollar to buy a coffee or a pastry. It took me 18 hours to get through the Italian police system (which consisted of one man sitting at a desk typing with his two index fingers). The U.S. Embassy was closed. (It was a Saturday – and they opened at 9am Monday morning.) I could not reach my parents or anyone in the U.S. to wire me money. My parents, of course, were at church all morning back in the states...not answering their phones. I sat outside Italy's version of a Western Union, hungry, and when I was offered some coins, I guess because I looked like I was a beggar...I took them, gratefully. And I got a bottle of water.

For 2 days – I had nothing. I did still have my trusty Rick Steve's travel guide though...and I showed up at 6am the next day in the pouring rain to the least expensive and place I could find...(a little apartment home type place he had written up in the index)...even though it looked a bit sketchy...but at this point – I didn't care. Drenched and shivering, tired from hauling my suitcase all over the cobbling brick streets, I rang the bell, waited...and waited...and began to walk away.

Then I heard a creak. I turned around and there was a man, looking tired – but immediately his eyes softened. I opened my mouth to explain that I'm sorry I was so early and that I didn't have any money but I was working on that...I was just really

tired...*but I barely got three words out.* Pino raised his hand in the air shook it and said...*shhh...shhh...*and he gestured me inside the double framed doors. He took my bags. He poured me a glass a wine. He showed me to a bed. No questions asked.

And the next day...when I finally stumbled out of slumber – he introduced me to his family - explained my plight – and I was doused in even more sympathy – from everyone. This was *Italian* sympathy mind you. For the next three days – I did not pay a cent for food – I was invited to the home-cooked family meals up on the roof...where we would eat steaming lasagna right out of the oven and drink wine for a couple hours – and eventually break into dancing...and sometimes the night ended with a motor scooter ride up to Michelangelo's Piazza.

As I sorted through the next few days...I was able to purchase another plane ticket...after getting a new passport photo taken and a temporary passport produced...and money wired from my parents.

But once I had some money, no matter how many times I offered – not a cent was taken – nor was there ever mention of a bill. In the end, I did leave a chunk of my Western Union-wired wad of cash for Pino...but he never asked for it – never expected it...

Pino's family showed me a generosity I had never known before – because they knew I had NOTHING that I could give back in return. Usually you get 5 star treatment at hotels because you are paying for that 5 star treatment. But this was a generosity I didn't know existed...it was extravagant...and unexplainable...and grace-filled.

While we as Americans (who tout self-reliance and independence) -- might liken my behavior to a leech or a moocher – Pino and his family did no such thing. I felt truly loved and welcomed by that family – and *all I could do* was receive that welcome.

Have you ever been in such a situation? Where you literally had nothing to give back to such an extreme act of generosity? It is hard – and honestly, it kind of worried me. Until - - - **I let go. And just received it.** After the first 24 hours of worrying – I realized that I was in good, safe, generous hands – and there was nothing I could do but enjoy this wonderful welcome. And I did. I stopped trying to worry about how I would reciprocate it. I stopped worrying about what I had been taught growing up, “Don’t talk to strangers,” and I talked away...I slept in a stranger’s house, and ate at a stranger’s table. The only thing keeping this family from being a total stranger was that Rick Steves had stayed here before. (Which wasn’t too much consolation when I was first knocking on that door at 6am in the rain.)

But by taking that risk, albeit a forced risk, I learned more about Italian culture and had more of an “authentic” Italian experience in that family-run home/hotel than I had in my 3 weeks of “planned” touring all over Italy. I didn’t plan those few

extra days of my trip – but they were what “made the trip,” so to speak. And I think that is because the experience was not on my “own terms” – terms that would have been made by my limited touristy knowledge anyway, rather they were on the terms of someone else who had so much to teach me and to offer me as a native of the country.

That summer, I **experienced** the grace of being welcomed, with no strings attached. *Not only because Pino bestowed it upon me. But because I finally let go and chose to receive it.* Pino taught me things about the “welcome of Christ” that I had never learned at any church before.

God’s love, and therefore *God’s welcome*, is not to be quantified or qualified. It just is. It is not to be paid back...but it is to be passed on.

Welcoming is a two way street. And these last three verses in Matthew 10 emphasize this reciprocity. Listen to how Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of the Bible, *The Message*:

⁴⁰ "We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. ⁴¹ Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small.

⁴² Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing."³

Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. No matter how big or small the act. Everything matters. Accepting help is not always easy because our pride gets in the way...our feeling of needing to be self-sufficient and not rely on others for our needs. But self-sufficiency is an American virtue...not a biblical one.

In her book *Amazing Grace*,⁴ Kathleen Norris tells the story of a nun who, although she has Alzheimer's, still asks to be rolled in her wheelchair to the door of her nursing home so she can greet every guest. Said one nun of her sister in ministry, "*She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to...but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life*" (265).

Norris continues, "*I read somewhere, in an article on monastic spirituality, that only people who are basically at home, and at home in themselves, can offer hospitality [or receive hospitality]...hospitality has a way of breaking through our insularity*"

³ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO) 2002, pg 1344.

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, (Riverhead Books, New York, NY), 1998.

(267).

Indeed. And if the Good News of the Gospel says anything – it says that we are to break through our own insularity and find a way to live and love in community in a new way...a way that honors each and every person we meet as the very presence of Christ. And that same presence that we encounter in others...we are to embody in ourselves too!⁵

So today, for you, – may "*what it means to welcome*" – mean:

1) **accepting the deep love of God** and walking into the wide open arms of God's welcome

2) **seeing the deep love of God** in those you least expect it...and taking time to experience that love and presence with them

3) **sharing the deep love of God** with others...those you know and those you don't...

And in welcoming in this way...the grace, mercy, and presence of Christ will be made known to you and through you.

That's what it means to welcome.

Amen.
