

July 2, 2017
Pentecost 4
Giving and Receiving Hospitality
Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42
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Gracia y paz del Dios! Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo.
Grace and peace from God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I grew up in an era when manners and etiquette trumped interpersonal relationships. Emily Post wrote a daily newspaper column answering questions about proper etiquette.

When you were entertained by someone else, you were expected to reciprocate with an equal form of hospitality.

I often wondered why my friends' parents hosted simple to lavish dinner parties and my own parents did not. I wondered why my friends' parents held pinochle parties on a rotating basis with other couples and my parents did not.

Many years later I came to understand that my mother believed she was ill-equipped to reciprocate the invitations of her contemporaries. She believed herself to be incapable of returning the hospitality in like fashion because of physical and financial restraints. She deemed herself unworthy of the hospitality of others.

Today we hear etiquette instructions from Jesus. And they are very different from Emily Post's instructions. The first four verses of Matthew 10 describe how Jesus gathered his disciples together, giving them authority to cast out demons and cure diseases. He went on to instruct them to go only to the lost sheep of Israel, not the Gentiles. This was not a mission to convert unbelievers, it was a mission to reinvigorate the Christian Jews who had scattered following the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E.

The disciples were to take no extra clothing or money or a walking stick. They were to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. Their most important message was to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near".

If a city received them, fine. If a city rejected them, fine, move on. AND, Jesus tells them, this is not going to be easy. "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves" he says. Last week we heard the end of that warning...They will encounter resistance. Even the members of their own households may become their enemies.

Jeremiah experiences this same enmity from his close associates. Hananiah is a colleague of Jeremiah's. They are two of the many prophets practicing in ancient Israel. Jeremiah reacted with skepticism to Hananiah's prophecy that Israel would be restored in two years

Compelled to tell the truth to the remnant left in Jerusalem, he reminds them that the prophecies of true prophets can be verified by the outcome, proof that the prophet is sent from God.

The disciples are sent out to do miracles – proof that they are sent from God. Whoever receives you, says Jesus, receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me...The Father.

There are a couple of conclusions we might come to when reading these last three verses of Matthew 10. If someone does not receive us as disciples of Jesus . . . too bad, their loss . . . just move on.

OR,

what if we turn this idea inside out and upside down and look at it from a completely different angle?

Who is receiving whom and what are they receiving? One of the requirements of the master of divinity program is a 12 week internship as a hospital chaplain. I had the privilege of fulfilling that requirement at Seattle's Harborview Medical. Hospital chaplaincy is exhausting physically, emotionally and spiritually. Harborview is a HUGE hospital! It is the regional trauma center for four states. It sits on a hill above the heart of downtown Seattle. It was common to hear helicopters land on the heliport several times a day. It was typical to be called to the emergency department at least twice often three or four times in the middle of the night shift to attend a gunshot death or a drug overdose. We were instructed to "be the calm presence" in the room. Calm in the midst of chaos. We were to offer solace when needed, a prayer, a shoulder to cry on or to just listen. I was prepared for all of that.

Armed with my anointing oil and my prayer book, I was ready to offer hospitality and the good news to everyone and anyone. What I was not prepared for were the many welcomes I would receive.

Late one night I was welcomed into a family's deepest fears and enormous grief. I was called to be with a man who was dying. He had been in an accident, slipped into a coma and was not going to recover. His young wife was 6 months pregnant, and they had six more children under 10 years old. The large extended family of parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins were gathered around his bed praying the rosary in Spanish. The young mother asked me to anoint him with oil and say a prayer. It did not matter to her that I was not Catholic and could not pray in Spanish. They invited me into their grieving circle of faith. Later that night the floor nurse paged to let me know the man had died. I went to the room and sat with the family. On the wall above the man's bed were posters that the children had made. They were filled with Bible verses and expressions of love for their father. One was a crude drawing of the entire family at what looked like a picnic. It said something like "Daddy we will always love you even when you are gone". The child who drew it took it down from the wall and offered it to me saying "thank you for being here with us, I want you to have this because you love God and you loved my daddy".

Whoever welcomes you in my name welcomes me. My first reaction was to refuse the child's gift. What if she regrets it later? Shouldn't she have that memento of the last days of her father's life? I now understand that the simple act of welcome into that family's circle is what Jesus is talking about today.

We are to extend hospitality to others, of course, AND we are to receive hospitality from others, because in receiving the hospitality of others we are receiving the hospitality of God.

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes Jesus. Whoever welcomes Jesus, welcomes the one who sent Jesus . . . God
Whoever welcomes a prophet, whoever welcomes a righteous person, whoever gives a cup of cold water to another person . . . None of these will lose their reward, Jesus says.

What is the reward? I can assure you it is not payment for doing the right thing, it is not material gain . . . it is not a "get into heaven free" card. The reward is the grace of God. Each time we come to this table to receive the body and blood of Christ we receive the reward. This reward that we have done nothing to earn. We receive this reward because of God's faithful and abiding love for us – God's grace!

It is God's grace that sets us free to be courageous witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have a choice: to remain shackled to sin or to be bound together with Jesus in his righteousness.

Jesus gives the church all the instruction we need for mission and ministry. And Jesus warns that mission and ministry will be met with hostility and suffering. The demands of discipleship are rigorous . . . go without extra clothing or money. The cost of discipleship is enormous . . . your family will turn against you, And Jesus promises surprising rewards. You will find outrageous, even scandalous hospitality where you least expect it.

Come to the table today to receive the outrageous, scandalous hospitality of a God who loves you beyond your wildest imagination.

Thanks be to God!