

Matthew 10: 40-42

40 “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. **41** Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. **42** And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

40 »Quien los recibe a ustedes me recibe a mí; y quien me recibe a mí recibe al que me envió. **41** Cualquiera que recibe a un profeta por tratarse de un profeta recibirá recompensa de profeta; y el que recibe a un justo por tratarse de un justo recibirá recompensa de justo. **42** Y quien dé siquiera un vaso de agua fresca a uno de estos pequeños por tratarse de uno de mis discípulos, les aseguro que no perderá su recompensa».

A Welcome Home

Let us pray: Gracious God, may your spirit rain down on our dusty lives with living water. May our faith take us to new spaces and places of being in our relationships with you and our neighbors. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Willkommen, kalós órises, benvenuto, foon—yen, bienvenido, welcome! Questionable pronunciation aside, that is how you say “welcome” in German, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Spanish and English. Welcome is one of those words in which how you say it is just as important as the literal meaning. Rare are the cases, at least I can confirm in Spanish and English, that the word be used without reflecting a kind temper by the person saying it. The word in ancient Greek, as it appears in the Matthew passage Clarabella and I read, is δέχομαι (dechomai). It is literally translated, and I will share four different definitions: “He who receives,” “to receive or grant access to, a visitor, not to refuse interaction or friendship,” “to

receive favorably, give ear to, embrace, make one's own, approve, not to reject," "to receive, i.e. to take upon one's self, sustain, bear, endure." In our brief lectionary passage, the word is used six times.

One key association we often make with the word welcome is the word home. We all know the phrase "welcome home," or even, "a home of welcome." And when we literally welcome someone, we might say, "make yourself at home." When it comes to being an actualized person, when it comes to finding our place in this world, when it comes to being at peace with our identity, a fundamental aspect of that is having a place where we feel welcome, or at home.

A couple of prophetic voices of American literature remind us about the that basic human need for a sense of home. Maya Angelou, in her book, "*All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*," wrote, "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." Echoing the sentiment of home as a place of acceptance, Twentieth century poet Robert Frost's words, "home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." For us to have any possibility of feeling peace in this world, we must believe that we have a place in which we are welcomed in spite of our idiosyncrasies—a place that we are accepted.

Noting that football and baseball are among the most viewed American pastimes, the late comedian George Carlin came up with a witty comedic routine explaining the reason he prefers baseball to football. He claimed that football combines the most unsavory aspects of American life like committee meetings, land grabs, and violence, while baseball, has as its purpose, that most wonderful of sentiments of coming home. According to Carlin, "In football the object is for the quarterback, also known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he

marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line. In baseball the object is to go home! And to be safe! - I hope I'll be safe at home!"

Safe at home. Humanity holds fewer sentiments as more precious. Our homes, our abodes, if we are fortunate enough to have one, are often our sanctuaries, providing comfort, shelter, and a place for us to find meaning and identity, rest and family interaction. For many, the home is sacred, and can, in the words of Mark Twain, become a place of "heart and soul," lived in with, "grace and in the peace of its benedictions." It is not an accident that our single largest governmental organization is called the Department of **H**omeland Security. Individually and corporately we are deeply invested in protecting what we consider to be our understanding of home. So home is not always so much a physical place as a spiritual one.

But this morning let us consider not an actual physical home, but rather see home as a metaphor for what it means to feel welcome in this world. We know that people with a stable home, can feel spiritually and emotionally homeless. And conversely, someone without such stability, that frequently moves around, can feel a sense of home in the soul.

When Jesus teaches his disciples about the notion of welcome, he reveals how important welcome is for him. Scholars are not clear what Jesus precisely means when he talks about welcoming prophets, righteous persons, or little ones. But what is obvious is that Jesus calls his followers to a disposition of welcome toward others. Rather than treat others with a spirit of distance or apathy or antagonism for that matter, we are called to a disposition of welcome, no matter who that other person is righteous or a "little one." These exhortations are part of a larger section of Matthew's gospel called the "missionary discourse." Jesus knew

that as he sent his followers out to share Gospel love, they would depend on the welcome of others. That is why he claims, “whoever welcomes you (you meaning His disciple), welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

But we also know the ideal of being safe at home, as Carlin called it, is for many, nothing more than an ideal. And that may just be why Jesus calls us to welcome others—to help them find a sense of home. For many in this world, their homes are dilapidated, overcrowded, unsafe, and uncomfortable. For others, homes are enclaves of sinful activity like violence and abuse, or narcotic laboratories. Broken homes and families sometimes seem like they are becoming the rule rather than the exception. Still others do not have a home. Homeless, internally displaced, exiles, and refugees worldwide represent a significant cross-section of the global population. These are individuals and families with no place to call home—no stable sense of comfort, shelter, or place. What a gift it is, especially for such folks, to be offered welcome—a taste of home.

The Psalmist alludes to the importance of our human need for a home, “Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she lay her young at your altars, O Lord of hosts” (Psalm 84: 3). A welcome home, I believe is important. And a collective moral imperative exists for citizens of the Earth to provide the possibility of a home for each other. But as Jesus’ followers, we are also given an imperative to live in a way that helps make others feel that spiritual sense of home.

This morning, I raise for us rhetorical questions for pondering. Questions we might consider in light of our passage. 1) Are we finding a welcome home for our souls in this world? 2) And if not, what is preventing that? 3) Are we extending that a sense of welcome to others? 4) As individuals and as a congregation?

The thing about being welcoming, it requires soul energy. It is always easier to ignore others than to engage them. That is why people often decide to shut out others, why churches, even well-intentioned ones, turn out to be not very welcoming. It is why it is easy to default to a posture of suspicion toward others before we know them. And it is why nations, sometimes take up postures with no sense of welcome. But Scripture has a different call for us. In it, Jesus calls us to be welcoming as individuals: “and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you—non of these lose their reward. Scripture convicts us to be welcoming as a community of faith. It calls us to be welcoming as a church: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” (Matthew 25). And scripture even calls on nations to provide welcome to strangers and those of other nations: “So show your love for foreigners, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt,” (Deuteronomy 10).

Let us sit with those questions this week. Let us meditate on them. Are we finding home for our souls in this world? If not, what might we do differently to find welcome? And, Are we extending welcome to others and individuals and a church? You have heard me point out the social phenomenon that churches are often the most segregated communities in society. But churches are called to welcome—even to people of different ilks. We are called to the kingdom work of welcoming others. And yes, as a church, we must have reasonable and healthy boundaries to preserve the well-being of the community. We are not called to be taken advantage of or walked over by others, but we are called to help make this place, this community, a welcoming home for all who earnestly desire to share in it.

Perhaps the application of Jesus’ instruction about welcome, it best illustrated by the words of twentieth century faith activist, Dorothy Day: “A

custom existed among the first generations of Christians, when faith was a bright fire that warmed more than those who kept it burning. In every house then a room was kept ready for any stranger who might ask for shelter; it was even called “the stranger’s room.” Not because these people thought they could trace something of someone they loved in the stranger who used it, not because the man or woman to whom they gave shelter reminded them of Christ, but because—plain and simple and stupendous fact—he or she was Christ.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.