

You Are Welcome

Deuteronomy 10:19-22; Hebrews 13:1-2; Matthew 10:40-42

June 28, 2020

“You are welcome.” Are there any words more pleasing to a stranger’s ears? The Bible is filled with many mandates to welcome guests and strangers . . . and all people who happen to show up at God’s House – well, anywhere for that matter.

I think that is because the Bible is filled with stories of the Israelites being strangers and exiles in a foreign land, and they were widely persecuted. The Jews were constantly uprooted and swept away, often under dangerous conditions, and so they knew first hand what it was like to be a stranger or an outcast in captivity.

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It is therefore not surprising that the Bible teaches hospitality as a moral imperative:

Welcome those who are unlike yourself . . . welcome those who may be searching and who may not have a spiritual home.

Welcome those whose skin color and background is different than yours.

Welcome those whose sexual orientation is different than yours.

Welcome those whose political persuasion is different than yours.

Welcome strangers in your neighborhood.

Welcome those who may have been disillusioned with the Church at an early age.

Welcome those whose questions may be unsettling or whose values, beliefs and attitudes may be vastly different than your own.

Welcome protesters who have been demonstrating against racial injustice.

You get the point. Welcome others. Period. It is mandated in the bible, and it is at the core of our being.

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The reading from Deuteronomy tells us that God's people remember that they were once strangers and exiles who were taken in by God. (Dt 10:19) He reminds that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. . . [for] ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

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In today's world, some people may still feel like strangers in their own house, or even strangers in their own skin. The Bible is a book about extreme hospitality and unconditional acceptance. Where else can you find that today?

If you are relatively new to the church, I hope you find that kind of grace and unconditional acceptance right here, right now. You are always welcome to join us on Zoom as well.

Therefore, it is no surprise that a central feature of the gospel can be found in the hospitality offered to strangers. It is one way some people experience Jesus, who came to the world and was shunned by many.

Through hospitality, the church can move forward in the world today. The world is starving for that kind hospitality and acceptance. The country, indeed the world is an angry place right now, and with good reason.

Part of anger is the hurt and pain that goes along with not being heard or welcomed because of the color of your skin, or because you are economically oppressed. A welcoming style of hospitality respects the dignity of every human being. It does not try to keep them out or deny them an opportunity for a better life.

The letter to the Hebrews, a portion of which you heard earlier, was a letter to a community under siege, yet it offers ways to put faith to work in the world. It includes the call to hospitality, invoking stories from the Hebrew Scriptures in which a stranger was welcomed, only to discover that the host entertained angels unaware.

In the OT Torah, the command to welcome the stranger occurs 36 times, more than any other specific command. That is amazing. Jesus, when teaching the disciples, tells them to extend hospitality especially to those with no way of paying them back.

Can you think of a time when you offered genuine hospitality and a warm welcome to someone who had no way to pay you back? Can you think of a time when someone has done that for you? It is so rare and so important. It could go a long way towards healing many of the wounds we are experiencing today as a nation.

Of course, we need to change the laws, but if we recognize the humanity in one another, we choose to accept them for who they are. When that happens, it provides a vision of God's unconditional love and a glimmer of hope.

I have been heartened the last few weeks at some videos of police taking a knee along with protesters. I have been heartened at some videos that show police and protesters hugging each other. I know a lot more change is needed, but I will take genuine acts of compassion and kindness whenever possible.

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Let me now say a few words about our own family and our experience of what it has meant to feel welcomed over the years. Our boys have moved quite a few times over their lifetime – five to be exact. Some were because my wife and I were pastors, and moved in order to serve another church.

We worried they might resent being PKs because of the frequent moves, and sometimes they even tried to hide from their friends the fact that their parents were pastors! They knew what it was like to be forced to start over and make new friends.

In the back of their minds they sometimes worried, “What if I don’t make new friends? What if I am not accepted? What if I’m not popular because of my acne or because I am overweight, or not athletic?” And, every parent’s nightmare – “What if my child is bullied because they are different?”

These were very real concerns as our sons were growing up, and it under-scores the need to welcome others and make them feel at home, especially kids while they are young and formative. They had some anxious moments, but it also provided some fresh opportunities and a new beginning.

Today they *still* wonder where they will make friends in their new surroundings. We tried to teach the boys to take the initiative to be a friend. It may be in a kind word, a smile, or holding the door for someone.

Our youngest son Josh is about to transfer to a new school, and he is concerned about making new friends because now no one is going to be on campus at least for the fall semester. It is not going to be possible for a while to have a typical college experience. Many young people are going to be facing this situation in a couple months.

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Welcoming others is so much of what is in our scripture lessons today. It is such a big part of what Jesus taught about in the gospels. We live in an inhospitable world. We live in a racially unjust world where hatred is fanned every day somewhere. We live in a politically divisive country where partisan politics is the norm, and parties often show a lack of civility for one another.

We live in a country where gay and lesbian folks have been denied housing and employment and opportunities, and too often the message was, “You are not welcome.”

The Supreme Court ruled just this past week that a landmark civil rights law protects gay and transgender workers from workplace discrimination, handing them the legal right that for too long had been denied. It may not prevent injustices, but it is a step in the right direction.

Can we just welcome and accept each other? Can we just stop being threatened or jealous or intimidated long enough “to love our neighbor as ourselves?” as the Old Testament law suggests?

Churches should be at the forefront of welcoming and accepting others, but over the years I have heard numerous hurtful stories of people who did not feel welcome or accepted. Maybe you have even been in a few of them yourself before you ended up here at FCC.

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This business of feeling welcome is deeply personal to me. As a young seminarian in Chicago and a probably a little bit homesick, I was looking for an inclusive faith community where I would feel welcomed. I tried several and found them lacking.

However, during my second year in seminary, I had a serendipitous, life changing encounter when I passed by Lakeview Presbyterian Church in Chicago. It was located on Chicago’s Northside, just a few blocks from Wrigley field where I used to live. I noticed a sign one day that said, “Visitors are welcome!” Did they really mean it? I had seen signs at other churches that said the same thing, and they were wrong.

After getting up some courage and summoning a “What do I have to lose?” attitude, I decided to visit the church one Sunday morning. The welcome was genuine and heartfelt. The effort to connect me with other people was intentional. Quite a few people approached me and introduced themselves, and welcomed me. They made sure I met their pastor, and some of them invited me to lunch afterwards.

This was in sharp contrast to a number of churches I had attended where I entered a stranger and left a stranger. I made Lakeview Presbyterian Church my home, and became and was sponsored as a candidate for ordination under their care. They provided a model for ministry I would remember all my life, and it became my top priority to make sure others were welcomed just as I was welcomed, especially when they attended church for the first time.

When my wife and I started the two new churches, we often had a dozen or so new visitors on Sunday. I noticed who they were, and made sure to greet them during the passing of the peace or the coffee hours. It was so important, and more often than not, they came back because of that personal connection.

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We can welcome every person as we would welcome Jesus himself, and of course, that is exactly what you are doing. Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Matthew 10:40

Do you remember the last time someone made you feel welcome -- whether it was an invitation to lunch or for a cup of coffee? That of course would have been pre-covid.

Just a few days ago I was out walking my dog, and a new neighbor greeted me -- "We hear you just bought Scott and Carole's house. We gather every Friday near the pool for a socially distant glass of wine, and you and your wife are welcome to join us." The next day I met our new neighbor, and I invited him too. It can happen any time and any place. You can be the one to make it happen.

I do not know how or when we will heal as a nation, but I do know it is not going to happen until others feel welcome and accepted for who they are. Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me."

You *can* make a difference, one person at a time. Whoever you are. Wherever we are, welcome others. You can change someone else's life, and maybe even your own. Amen

Deuteronomy 10:19-22

¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

²⁰You shall fear the Lord your God; God alone you shall worship; to God you shall hold fast, and by that name you shall swear. ²¹God is your praise; God is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²²Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Hebrews 13:1-2

Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Matthew 10:40-42

10:40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

10:41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

10:42 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, none of these will lose their reward."