

BIBLE READING: Matthew 10:40-42

SERMON

What does the word ‘hospitality’ mean to you?

Maybe you think of the hospitality industry, the many service jobs involved in hospitality - the front desk and housekeeping staff at a hotel, the flight attendants on an airplane, the guest services department at an event venue. These people are all doing the work of hospitality. It's their job to make people feel welcome in a place, make people feel comfortable, help them with any questions or needs they might have.

Or maybe when you think of hospitality, you think of welcoming guests into your own home. If you invite friends over for dinner, or have houseguests, what do you do to provide hospitality? You tidy up, you make up a bed, you make sure the fridge is stocked or plan a nice meal. All of these things are ways of extending hospitality, helping your guests to feel welcome and comfortable.

We also talk about hospitality in the church. We have greeters who welcome people to church on Sunday morning. We look after our property and building so that it's attractive and easy to navigate. Before the pandemic we would have morning tea after church. We would open our buildings to different groups. All of these things are hospitality.

In all these examples of hospitality, it's about welcoming people in to our space. Whether it's a hotel, your own home, or the church, we turn on the lights, open the doors, and welcome people in. And that's a worthwhile thing to do.

But it's not what Jesus tells us to do in our gospel reading this morning. In today's reading, Jesus doesn't instruct his disciples to welcome people in; instead, he sends the disciples out. Instead of telling them to provide hospitality to strangers, he tells them to receive hospitality from the world.

Today's reading continues the teaching we heard the last two Sundays. Jesus sends out his twelve disciples, telling them to go from town to town, to travel without any money or supplies, to depend on the kindness of strangers. Instead of offering hospitality, Jesus tells them to go out and receive hospitality.

Receiving hospitality is a risky proposition. What if you go over to someone's house and don't like the food they serve? What if the bed isn't comfortable? What if they use instant coffee?

Okay, those examples are a little silly. But when you're receiving hospitality, it means you're not in control. You don't get to choose what you eat, or where you sleep. It might even mean you find yourself in an unsafe situation. How many of us would, without a second thought, accept the hospitality of a free drink at the bar from a stranger? You can't know what's in the drink or what the stranger's intentions are. Even if that stranger is only trying to be friendly, you just can't know. Accepting hospitality is risky.

Jesus warns his disciples about the dangers of depending on hospitality, too. He warns them that they won't always be welcomed - in fact, they may be hated, persecuted, even killed on account of Jesus.

There is a flip side to those warnings, and it is in our Gospel reading today. Yes, disciples may be rejected on account of Jesus. Yes, relying on the hospitality of others is risky. But, Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

If you follow Jesus, if you are a disciple, the world may reject you on his account. But sometimes, the world will welcome you on his account. Anyone who welcomes a disciple welcomes Jesus himself.

There's a famous passage in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. Jesus describes the final judgment, saying, "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my children, you did it to me.'"

In that passage, Jesus teaches us that showing kindness, providing hospitality, to strangers is the same as giving kindness and hospitality to Jesus himself. If we want to see Christ in the world, we only have to look at our neighbors. We will see the face of Christ in the faces of the people around us. When we care for them, we are caring for Christ.

Today's reading tells the other side of the story. Matthew 25 says: if we want to encounter Christ, we should look to the people around us. We find Christ in the world. Matthew chapter 10 turns that around. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." We find Christ in the world. And the world finds Christ in us.

The world finds Christ in us. Whoever welcomes us welcomes the one who sends us. Whatever kindness and hospitality we receive, that same kindness and hospitality is given to Jesus our Lord.

I love how these two passages in the gospel of Matthew fit together. If we want to know where to see Christ in the world, we should look in the face of a stranger. And if the world needs to know where to see Christ, Christ is found in us. These two texts show us two sides of hospitality—the calling to provide hospitality to the stranger, and the challenge of accepting hospitality from the world.

I think you all are pretty good at providing hospitality. You love to provide hospitality here at church and over in the hall on Sunday mornings! You show hospitality to the other churches and community groups that use our facilities. You offer hospitality in your own homes.

This week, I want to challenge you to take on the other side of the equation. Instead of being the one who stays in your own space and provides hospitality to others, try to see where God is calling you out - out of your comfort zone, out of your space, out of the familiar things you can control.

As disciples of Christ, sometimes we are the ones who provide a welcome and hospitality. But we can't stop there. We can't sit in our comfortable homes and cook meals we know we like and invite other people to come to us. We have to also go out, be the ones who are strangers in an unfamiliar place. We have to be willing to risk discomfort, rejection, even danger. We have to be willing to receive hospitality as well as give it.

Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Let's take a chance and let the world welcome Jesus through us. Amen.

Acknowledgement: Pastor Jennifer