

Sermon on Matthew 10:40-42, Romans 6:12-23
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 28, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, welcome to all GLBTQIA siblings, blessings to all women who celebrate 50 years of ordination in this church, grace and peace....

Today's gospel is primarily about *welcome*. Jesus sent out the twelve disciples into the towns and villages to share the good news of God, with authority over unclean spirits, to cast out demons and to cure every disease and sickness that they found among the people. Lord knows, we could use those disciples now! When they came to those towns and villages, Jesus said "*Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet...or a righteous person...or gives even a cup of cold water to one of you, I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*" There's a reward, Jesus? Well, actually, the life following Jesus is reward enough, but more of that later. As Paul said to the church in Romans, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Many of us have a "Welcome Mat" outside the front door of our homes. It is there to welcome visitors and invited guests, as they look down to wipe their feet before they enter. That is, if you open the door and invite them in! That's up to you as host! Which reminds me of the scripture in which Jesus says "*Behold I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*" (Revelation 3:20) Of course, we would love to welcome Jesus into our home when he comes to visit! He is knocking, figuratively, offering to enter into our lives and hearts, if we will let him in. Will we? Will we follow him when he calls? Who else will we welcome?

So how about welcoming human beings into our homes, our churches, or our lives? Jesus said whoever welcomes the least of these, welcomes him. This is a greater challenge, of course. Like the welcome mat in front of our homes, most churches have a sign at their door or write in their Sunday service sheets, "*All Are Welcome!*" For we believe that "welcome" to others is expected of us. But how does this work out specifically? We love giving a general welcome to everybody out there, but there are those who we are not so keen on welcoming in. Right? In some ways, a general "All Are Welcome" sign is meaningless. How do we make our welcome real? And how are we receivers of welcome from others?

Today we read the scriptures from a context full of paradox and irony. Today is *Pride Sunday* in many congregations which are Reconciling in Christ, a day on which we celebrate our welcome into our churches the human beings who identify as GLBTQIA – who for many years were expressly NOT WELCOME in Lutheran churches, and still are not welcome in many Christian congregations all

over the world . About 20 years ago we voted on an Affirmation of Welcome to make our welcome specific. You can read it in our service sheet every Sunday: *“Because every person is a child of God, we welcome you without regard to culture, ethnicity, skin color, physical or mental ability, age, family situation, refugee or immigrant status, economic status or social standing. We welcome you without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity, and invite you to join us in worshipping God...”* It took us all a long time to get there, even longer for the ELCA and we fall short of this welcome every day, but this is our intent, in the name of Jesus, who died in order to reconcile all of us, the whole world to God.

We are all sent, but we must avoid crowds and maintain social distance, wearing masks. We gather today in the midst of a Covid-19 global pandemic. How do we welcome others when we are not even gathering ourselves in one place for worship, and the church has been closed for all meetings since March 15? Oh, the irony! Even now, our welcome is very limited to groups under ten with conditions. We welcome all in the name of Christ, but last week I had to say to one of our Narcotics Anonymous group leaders that *“you are welcome to meet with the condition that you each wear masks, not have a fever, limit your group’s number to 10, practice social distancing, take attendance for contact tracing, don’t smoke or eat or drink, and disinfect your space when you leave.”* That doesn’t sound very hospitable, but it’s the law, and we want to keep them, and all of us, safe!

We are also gathering today in the midst of social unrest and soul-searching in America over the sin of systemic racism in our institutions, and the white privilege that infects most of our churches like a virus – especially our beloved Lutheran Church, which remains 98% white after all these years, despite our hopes and intentions. We haven’t figured out how to welcome or be hospitable to those who don’t look or act or sing or worship just “like us”, so here we are. Then there was the murder of George Floyd in our sister city of Minneapolis, just blocks from Calvary Lutheran Church, and the Minneapolis Police Precinct was burned down just blocks from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. Not only that, but the burning came over to our side of the river to the Midway in St. Paul, to the Target a block away from Bethlehem Lutheran on the Midway. So now three Lutheran Churches have had their ministry transformed into a 24-hours a day “welcome by necessity” as they splashed milk on protesters who were tear gassed. Each congregation now is receiving donations three days a week, and distributing bags of food and necessary supplies to women, children and families on the other days, because the local grocery stores were burned down. *All are welcome* – which includes all the volunteers and donations from other Lutherans throughout the Minneapolis and St. Paul Area Synods and beyond are needed!

So it is very ironic, that all of this “welcome” language comes in the same gospel passage in which Jesus sends his disciples out to share the good news of hope and healing for people who are suffering. Nothing has changed, has it?

So today, as we worship on “Zoom”, we wonder how do we welcome people into virtual cyber-space that is unfamiliar, not a warm, brick building with stained glass? Well, we have a host (named David), whose role is to welcome us and let each of us into the meeting, while protecting us from “Zoom bombers” who might disrupt the gathering. Some people say that *“the church has left the building”*, which four months ago would have been unimaginable, but oddly hasn’t ended our ministry! We now find our ministry and mission “online” – as well as on telephone, instead of in person or physically present. The paradox is that we are finding our voice to worship and proclaim the gospel online, while we still long for the sacred space that we still call “home” at 285 North Dale Street – where we still ring the tower bells at noon and record music and hymns for worship. We also do a lot of meetings and church business on Zoom, and I meet with lots of other pastors and faith leaders this way – even a meeting on Zoom with the governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general to talk about policies that will benefit all Minnesotans, and bring us through these challenging times. In a way, there has never been a more challenging, more invigorating, or better time to be the Church!

Which leads me to a final thought. When Jesus called his disciples, he didn’t call them to stay inside synagogues or the Temple to lead worship and teach there. He sent them out into the world, into towns and villages to bring good news from God – that God loves you, that your life matters, that you are forgiven and offered mercy, not judgment – with a promise of life forever, through faith! This promise is a free gift of life – not a “reward” that you must earn – because you’ve already received the promise! So, Jesus sends you and me out the door, kicking and screaming perhaps because we’d rather stay inside our beautiful sanctuary to sing and pray. But that’s where our mission is: outside, in the world, on the streets, in cyberspace, in the homes and places where people do their business. And we go out vulnerable, as guests of those we meet, seldom as hosts.

You see, this passage is all about what Jesus told his disciples to expect when they went out. They might get push back for their words and ministry. People might not listen, they might slam their doors or refuse to let them in. If so, they should shake the dust off their feet and move on to the next house. But from some they would receive welcome, and that was their great reward! So they must be humble to bring the good news while still being vulnerable to the hospitality of their prospective hosts. But this was their encouragement: *“whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and the one who sent me – that’s God!...And whoever gives you even a cup of cold water as you come in the name of a disciple of him, has their reward.”* So have no fear, little flock! For LIFE has been promised to you! As we worry these days about the future of the Church, do not fear, because the Church is in you and me, as Christ and the Word of God live in us! You and I have been called in baptism, and sent by God to share good news and hope, wherever it takes us. Thanks be to God! Amen.