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# “Welcoming Christ”

Matthew 10:40-42

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*“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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, 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.”*

*Matthew 10:40-42*

For a year after seminary, I chose to live in intentional Christian community. I wanted to be changed by a place that treated every knock on the door as if Jesus was the one knocking, so I went to learn from them. They made relationships with those that fit Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry.”

I was excited to be a part of their search for the divine image in everyone, especially the poor and hungry. I was excited to hold their values as my own and be changed by Love. I couldn’t predict that joining them meant every selfish tendency or biased thought I had would come to light. I made close-to nothing, so I was truly reliant on those I shared life with. I needed them for their cars, their dinners, their shelter. I physically couldn’t do a single day alone.

One night, as we were thinking about welcoming more folks to our space, they asked if one or two could stay in my room with me. And I felt my body tighten. I guess I had felt pushed far enough. I didn’t want to welcome anyone to my room. Even if it was Jesus. And I had been giving all my waking hours to them and our values and community

ministry. My room felt like a sanctuary. It was my only private space. I didn't want to share it.

As I felt my people ask for my independent identity to give way to the bigger identity of the community, I fought it.

I chose protection over connection.

Giving hospitality is not easy. It means being vulnerable, opening up—physically or emotionally—for another person to be with us. It means allowing that person to be who they are and love them for it. But we have a hard time trusting they are going to treat us with mutual respect. And because our culture values independence and power, we would rather protect ourselves.

Receiving hospitality is hard too.

There's a story the recovery community shares about a man who has an accident and is stranded in the Himalayas for days. He wakes up angry in the hospital. The nurse asks him why, because it seems like a miracle. He says, "I lay in my plane overnight, broken, freezing, praying to God to save me. What a joke." The nurse reminds him that he's alive and doing well. And he responds "Yeah, because some Sherpa came along."

We don't like admitting we need anyone else. It feels weak. Allowing people to welcome us, take care of us, save us, means we need them. But we do need them. Their presence in our lives helps us grow in ways we can't on our own.

When we risk opening ourselves up to someone else, when they risk opening themselves up to us, that mutual welcome can save both our lives.

Not long after his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes sure his disciples only create mutual welcome when they go out to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with a skin disease, and cast out demons.” Jesus gives them the power to heal people, but then he makes sure that they are not the only ones with power in the relationships they create.

“Don’t take an overnight bag,” he tells them before they leave. “Don’t take any money or an extra pair of shoes.”

The disciples look at each other in confusion. They’re not sure how that’s supposed to work when they’re going to be away from home for weeks.

Their pilgrimage is risky because they are totally reliant on the hospitality of strangers. Jesus sends them to go throughout Israel and stay only where they are welcome. And if a house or town doesn’t welcome them, then he tells them to shake the dust from their feet and move on.

At the end of this long list of instructions and risks, Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes God. Hospitality can be as simple as sharing a cup of cold water,” he tells them. “And whoever does that will receive love in return.”

So the disciples will end up eating with strangers and sleeping in homes they have never entered before. They have power to heal, but they need those they are healing. They need them so much that Jesus comforts their fear by reminding them that he goes with them.

We are the people we love. We carry them with us. And wherever we go, we carry Christ with us too.

When we find ourselves turning toward something for no obvious reason—a stranger helping someone reach the

beans on the top shelf at the grocery store, the bus driver going out of his way to make sure we're safe, the woman on the corner telling us we're doing a good job—it may be that the light in us is recognizing the light near us. We are all made of the same stuff.

But we have to be free enough of our baggage to receive it. We can't keep a scorecard. We can't let our resentment simmer. We can't hold tight to our prejudices. If we keep saying "should," we haven't let go of enough to experience what's waiting for us. If we keep feeling offended by what happens to us, we will miss being made better by God's people. We have to learn how to shake the dust from our feet, so we can continue the business of loving.

We are the disciples, sent by Jesus, called to leave our baggage behind and rely on the hospitality of others. But we are also the ones opening ourselves up to those who come into our lives. The hope we have of healing ourselves is in welcoming others.

My friend Eric left his salaried career because he felt his soul was suffering. But he and his wife had just had a baby, and since he had no other job waiting for him, he went to work at a grocery store. The transition was hard. His job had always helped him know who he was. And when he stopped doing it, he says, "it was almost as if I stopped existing altogether." So the days and nights spent checking people out and stocking shelves and bagging groceries were heavy with depression.

He was working the closing shift one Sunday night, impatiently waiting for the last shoppers to finish up, when a woman comes to his register. She has a cart full of

cranberry juice. Here's how Eric tells the story:

I opened our transaction with an old retail standby: "So how are you tonight, Ma'am?" Her response (without looking up): "Fine." Off to a good start.

"I see you are enjoying our cranberry juice."

Her response (still not looking up): "It's the only thing that will settle my stomach after chemotherapy."

Almost every day, [Eric says], we encounter moments in which throwaway comments or lowered gazes invite us to slow down, take a deep breath, and authentically enter into the pain of someone else. Typically, we ignore these few minutes amid the noise, clutter, and ceaseless doom scroll of existence. The thought, then, of pausing to take on more from someone else doesn't just seem overwhelming; it seems fundamentally wrongheaded and self-destructive.

Yet for some unknown and possibly miraculous reason, at the end of a long shift when I found myself particularly angry about quitting a cushy job where I wasn't paid by the hour to make small talk about cranberry juice, I meagerly offered, "I'm sorry to hear that. How has it been going?"

This olive branch was immediately snapped in two by the woman's gruff announcement that she was "dying from the cancer that has already claimed my adult son—so, not well, I guess you could say."

Eric excused himself and went over to the flower stand. When he returned, he says, "Well, I don't have much to offer, except to say that these are pretty much the last \$5.99 flowers left in the store, and I want you to have them, on the house."

When she looked up for the first time, her breath caught in her throat, and through tears, she choked out,

“Eric, huh? That was my son’s name.”

And right there, during closing time, with a line of last-minute shoppers waiting behind them, Eric started crying and hugging a complete stranger.

Eric reflects on this moment as one that saved his life. In the middle of his own loneliness and sense of failure, he bore witness to another person’s impossible pain. They slowed down long enough to see each other. It didn’t take the pain away, but it revealed that they weren’t alone. And it changed what he knew about God. That night he learned that God sees us in our pain.

And the mutuality they helped both of them be okay for a while.<sup>1</sup>

Every day we have the choice to fill our words and actions with Christ’s grace or to shut down and pretend we don’t need anyone else.

And if we don’t know how to start, maybe we start just by offering water to someone who is thirsty.

Hospitality looks like actually giving cups of water, not just talking about love, actually bandaging wounds, actually converting abandoned lots into community gardens, opening our homes to share with those who need it, visiting those in prison and crying with those who are grieving, actually providing a hot shower.

But we can’t open our homes, share a meal or give a cup of cold water just to those we feel comfortable with. We won’t ever be saved, if that’s what we do because God works outside of our boxes. If there are limits to our hospitality, then our world won’t ever be saved either.

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<sup>1</sup>Eric Minton, *It’s Not You, It’s Everything: What Our Pain Reveals About the Anxious Pursuit of the Good Life*, Minneapolis, 2022.

So the challenge Jesus gives us is to open our tables, homes, hearts the way we do for the people we love until no one is left out. Welcome in those you don't understand, not to change them, but just because they are God's too. And our reward, when we welcome whomever is knocking on our door, not just those we would choose, is that our theologies can be expanded, our imaginations can grow and our faith can strengthen. We will be made new.

May the church be the place where everyone is radically welcome, no matter the demons they battle or their income-level. No matter their skin color or cultural awareness. No matter who they voted for or what they wear on Sundays. No matter where they live or who they call family. Because when we are not seen anywhere, by anyone, our God sees us and loves us without judging us. God is our refuge when no one else welcomes us. So if we are the church, given to the glory of God, we have to welcome and live without judging too. We have to open our doors wide to the immigrants seeking safety and the addicts looking for support. We have to offer embrace to the child doing the brave work of transitioning and the man bravely begging for money. This is a place where we all need to find refuge. Because we are all God's. This is a place where we lower our defenses and let our hearts be tender because we're hoping God meets us through the people we find here. We're hoping they will help us become closer to who God intends for us to be.

And when we make space at our table for each other, we make space for Christ. At the communion table, we are reoriented to the presence of Christ among us. Because it's easy to forget out there. So we come again and again



because here we aren't grocery clerk, nurse, teacher, CPA or CEO. We are just a loved child of God, part of something so much bigger than us.

Showing up as a human is hard. But at the table, we remember that, by God's goodness, we are part of the body of Christ. That the person in front of us and beside us at this table is just as full of the image of God as we are. Here, we gain the courage to be truly loving, to give ourselves to each other, to offer grace and receive it. At the table our vision renews, and we mercifully see God among us again.

*sermon © Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey*