

A Welcome That Never Ends
Matthew 10:40-42

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Over the course of several weeks, the lectionary readings have focused on the Gospel of Matthew, in particular, the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples before he sent them out on their own to preach the good news, heal the sick, and welcome the outcast.

It was one thing to travel with Jesus as he was surrounded by so many people clamoring for his presence, and something else entirely to embark on a journey without Jesus, without his charismatic appeal, without the intensity of his person to offset their own uncertainties, their own doubts about the authority he had given them.

Surely they must have wondered how many doors would be shut, how many faces turned aside. Jesus had given them permission to take their leave of any house that would not welcome them or hear their words. Now he assured them that whoever received them, was receiving not just them but Jesus himself, and not just Jesus but God.

One of my teaching responsibilities at Bangor Seminary involved a weekly ministry seminar. Students who were working several hours a week in parishes, hospitals, or prisons would come together to share their experiences and reflect on their own practices. How they handled themselves in ministry situations.

Invariably the notion of a cold call would come up in terms of hospital visits. Cold calls involved walking into a stranger's room, introducing themselves as a member of the chaplaincy program and asking if they could help in any way. I understood the realities of this knee knocking experience as I'd been in that place many times.

But I had come to understand a very important dimension of ministry—that of presence. Some students would misuse the term and think just being in the room was a ministry of presence, but presence means more than that, as Jesus suggests...whoever receives you receives me and the one who sent me.

To go forth on behalf of Jesus, meant embodying his teachings. To invoke his name was to transmit **his** presence not their own. This is what those students needed to learn; there is no such thing as a cold call. If you engage a stranger with good news, the news brings with it an immediacy of divine presence. That's true, for the receiver and the received...being received is heady business.

I touched on this two weeks ago when I spoke about sharing God's glory here and now. The capacity to experience God's glory here and now is not a false promise---it requires no mediator; but it does require *unlearning* what we have thought about our world and ourselves. It requires releasing fear and welcoming an ever-present hope.

Jesus had spent many hours with the disciples teaching them one thing—not to do what he did, but to be who he was...an honest reflection of God's loving presence in the universe. To carry that off they had to fully live and be themselves—*Just as I Am* is the operative phrase for those who want to experience the greatening power of God's grace. In the words of singer and songwriter John Bell, our life prayer is essentially this..."Take, O Take me as I am. Summon out what I shall be, set your seal upon my heart and live in me. Trusting God's love enough to be who we are...not someone else... is no small task, in a world such as ours.

Centuries ago a Chinese proverb spoke of living true to oneself in a world of ten thousand things...today ten thousand things come at us in a nano second. For those of you who don't know or have forgotten, a **nano second** is a unit of measure equal to *one trillionth of a second*. No wonder we are reeling much of the time. Sorting out the priorities of life one second at a time is difficult enough.

In the world of science and technology time is an essential element...it also structures our day in significant ways. If you are contemplating flying soon—as I am—you want your plane to leave and arrive on time. You also want air traffic controllers to accurately calibrate takeoff and landings with precision especially when the latest news reminds you of four near misses at Lax in the past month.

Time has life and death dimensions that can't be dismissed. In Camden New Jersey, the grieving families of three young boys found suffocated in the trunk of a car this week, three days after the car was supposedly searched, will forever ask themselves why it took three days to find open the trunk. In a world of nano seconds, time matters, but when it comes to the world of faith... time stands still.

Moment to moment, nanosecond-to-nanosecond, God's love is present and accessible...the irony is that we confuse human time with God's time. Love knows no timetable...it never stops loving. Each and every day, in a world of competing timetables...**God just is**...everywhere present, available, compassionate, and receptive to us, just as we are. No pretences needed, no excuses too inexcusable. Our true calling is to be who we are...to receive the immediacy and power of God's love and share it through our very being. That's what Jesus hoped to get across to his disciples...live this truth and there are no cold calls.

Live as though God is with you and within you...and you will radiate the most powerful love imaginable, a love that will warm you and feed you in the depths of your being. Being the love you know is all that is expected of you and me. Unfortunately, the love we know is subject to the conditions of the world we live in. The difficulty comes from living not just in this physical world which all of us do...in one degree or another...though some days I wonder which planet some politicians... [No, no... forget that senior moment...]

The serious point I am trying to make is this: we live in multiple inner worlds even as we share the same physical reality. Mental illness or depression is a factor, or course, but even with the best of mental health shaping our thoughts and feelings, each of us inhabits inner worlds of our own making. That's because we live in various worlds of meaning.

We interpret our shared worlds differently because the life experiences that make up our bodily existence are varied by design. The creative source of all life, thank God, allows creativity to be a central theme of existence. The world would be dull and void otherwise. The creator also coupled creativity with freedom of expression. You and I are free to experience the world, to interpret or express the world we experience, differently. What we are not free to do is ignore the consequences of our actions that are a direct result of our differing interpretations.

You and I see and experience the world differently by design but basic to both of us is the lived experience of oneness with God and each other. That's the heart of the matter; our inseparability takes precedence over all differences. We are ultimately one, all creation, all life, human and non-human and that includes ultimate being, God's being too. What makes the difference in the well-being of this oneness and our individual lives is how we live out our thoughts and feelings.

A disciple who acts out of fear and a lack of trust can hardly live as a healing loving presence on the other hand a disciple rich in love and steeped in trust loves and heals effortlessly. The context of our inner and outer world matters: what we receive shapes who we are. In the words of Ernest Holmes, "we can't experience more than we can accept, but we can expect more than we have been experiencing." That's where hope and imagination come in. If we are open—by that I mean non-fearful—we can receive God's fullness and make that fullness our own...

As I have said before, God's grace greatens us. God wants us to be fully God *and* fully human. But many find this fullness overwhelming. The notion that anyone but Jesus can be fully human and fully God is blasphemous in orthodox circles where God's power is allocated to a few and doled out sparingly. But that's not the whole

truth—it's not even God's truth. Hear the good news that Jesus preached.... those who receive you, receive me and the one who sent me.

Receive can mean to welcome and accept. It can also mean to take hold of as in to capture by force—the threshold of difference lies in recognizing whether fear orchestrates the meeting or love does. Because we are subject to fear and love simultaneously...and because fear and love represent the extremes of human emotion, all of us need something to keep us grounded, focused, and aware of the source that is the guiding light of our lives...God's loving presence.

Invariably we fail when we strike out on our own and confuse our intentions with God intentions. When that happens we become, as Abraham Heschel often observed, messengers who have forgotten the message. Jesus stayed on message; unfortunately Christianity in its institutional phases chose to make Jesus the message, rather than the messenger. One of the primary reasons for this shift was the worldview that dominated everyday life in ancient times, and lives on today in numerous expressions.

Receive is not the only operative word in this morning's text...the other is reward...If the context for living is reward and punishment and God is likened to a king or emperor who does so on a daily basis, then the controlling mindset for those who have no power and exist at the whim of the emperor will be to seek rewards rather than punishment. The church as it evolved from house church to the emperor's church used the reward of heaven for good behavior and the punishment of hell for disobedient believers. That's why the notion of penance, devised by the second century theologian / lawyer Tertullian became so prominent in Christian circles.

The church began to teach that if you want to save your soul in the life to come, you have to be punished in the here and now in order to avoid the fires of hell. The notion of penance is a subject for another day. The primary point for today is this Jesus didn't live in a world of tomorrow, he lived in a world of now...this moment not the next.

In a world where reward and punishment shape human experience receiving Jesus, has become a minefield of opportunity. In this kind of world, receiving Jesus today does not mean receiving God within; it mostly means receiving assurances that heaven not hell will be your final reward.

Let me be clear about Jesus the messenger and the message he came to share. Heaven and hell are not afterlife destinations, they are attitudes of being here and now. Those who cannot trust God's love here and now create living hells for the rest of us. When fear orders our lives receiving becomes morphed by distrust. Our fear is then free to make us captives of our faith instead of witnesses. When love orders our lives receiving becomes welcoming...it becomes as today's sermon title suggests, the welcome that never ends.

Jesus believed in *a world of endless welcomes*; and that's the world we are called to live in. Of course it matters that the rest of the world is too afraid to live there, let's not kid ourselves. Jesus lived in the real world, a world of stoning, flogging and crucifixions. He still lives and dies in a world of lynching, bombing and terror. What matters most, my friends, is that you and I, having received Jesus' message of unconditional and everlasting love, are not afraid to live a life of endless welcome. That's the witness we bring to Simi Valley and the world, " 'whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!' We receive you in the name of Jesus and in the name of the loving presence he incarnates."

My prayer for all of us is that time stands still, that we experience the endless welcome we need to know, in order to be love for one another and the world. Living this welcome is reward enough. And so it is. Amen.