

The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
Proper 8A
June 26, 2011
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
Matthew 10.40-42
“Whoever welcomes...”

Blessed be the Name of God

I have read the gospel for this morning over and over through the week and I must confess at the outset, I don't know what the reward is, exactly. “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.” I'm confident that Jesus knew what all this meant and perhaps those who first heard him speak these lines knew what he meant, but, as for me, I don't know what he meant. I just don't know what the reward is.

However, the first line of the reading, happily, I think I get that. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” I think I get this one. In welcoming each other, we are welcoming Jesus himself. In welcoming anyone, we are welcoming Jesus himself.

We know this line of reasoning. We've heard it before. Remember the text about the hungry, naked and those in prison where Jesus scolds his hearers for not feeding him or clothing him or visiting him in prison and they righteously reply, when did we do such things? It was the least of these, he said. Neglecting them is neglect of me. So also, the

welcoming of them is the welcoming of Jesus. In truth, you see, there is only Jesus, no one else.

Amy and I have come here only very recently and we are coming, more and more, to know the parish and the stories and the politics and all such like. We know from things we have read that the core values for the parish are compassion, commitment, reverence and reconciliation. Over time, we will discover how these values are lived out. But if our experience is any test, one of the operative if unexpressed core values is surely hospitality.

I say this for two reasons. The second reason I say this is because we have found you all to be warmly and wonderfully hospitable to us. Though some of you knew something of us before we arrived, our dear friend Bp. Rickel seems to have said something about us here before we moved, nonetheless, we were essentially strangers. On our first visit after moving here last November, we were met at the door by Jack Wood whose handshake is surely the touch of grace and welcome, and we were gathered in. Over the next days and weeks, that welcome continued as we met members of St. Augustine's at the grocery store, at the Ace Hardware, or at Useless Bay Coffee. We had occasion to seek some information at the Senior Center and there was Joan Wortman, eager to help and eager to welcome us.

I would be hopeful and confident that our experience would be the experience of everyone who comes to our door, a stranger. It's a very good experience! The second reason, then, that hospitality must be a core value here is because our experience teaches us that.

Now the first reason for the centrality of hospitality in our self understanding must be this scriptural admonition from Jesus. This wonderful and entirely messy word “whoever” is the clincher. How non-specific can you get?! Whoever welcomes and whoever is welcomed, it is the welcome itself that makes testimony. It is Jesus who welcomes and it is Jesus who is welcomed. And in so far as this is so, “the one who sent” him is welcomed as well.

But who is this Jesus and how will we know him? Well, you see, that’s precisely the point. We won’t know; we can’t know. Our welcome, therefore, is to be indiscriminate, without standard, without particular expectation. It is “whoever,” remember. Hospitality like this is a mark of the Christian life, hence a core value for us.

Today marks the second week anniversary for our newly dedicated facilities. After years of fretting and working and sweating, our new digs are two weeks old. I had the privilege of serving with a handful of other parishioners on a task force chaired by Jay Ryan, charged with setting out policies that would direct the use and availability of our new place. It was clear from the beginning of our conversations that part of the rationale for building our fine new hall had very much to do with our larger life in this part of the world. We were to be a place where South Whidbey could find a place to meet for a wide assortment of reasons. Witness, for example, the concert that will fill this room later this afternoon. It was and is our intent to be generous with our buildings and good stewards of them as well, “prudent generosity” I called it.

And that’s as it should be. At the same time, our bishop, in his remarks after the dedication, admonished us to “wear it out.” Use the building, he said, knowing that over time, it will wear, showing signs of use and age. Insofar as that is true, he meant that the

building would testify to our commitment to hospitality and our engagement with the world.

Now I want to take this consideration of hospitality two steps further. To make the first of these steps, I depend upon the Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, whose splendid, resonant poetry I commend to you. Titled “The Word,” Thomas offers this short and disconcerting experience in free verse:

A pen appeared, and the god said:
‘Write what it is to be
man.’ And my hand hovered
long over the bare page,

until there, like footprints
of the lost traveler, letters
took shape on the page’s
blankness, and I spelled out

the word ‘lonely’. And my hand moved
to erase it; but the voices
of all those waiting at life’s
window cried out loud: ‘It is true.’

Collected Poems 1945-1990, 265.

“Lonely.” It’s everybody’s experience sometime, some place. And for some folks it is far too common, enduring, everyday. You know what it’s like. Something like being lost. There is the loneliness of solitary living, the loneliness of unemployment, the loneliness of illness or distress or bereavement and so the list goes. Lonely. You know people like this, I’m sure of it.

Our penchant for hospitality has something for them, if only they knew it. I know that Nigel has, likely for years, urged you to bring a friend to church. “This is a good place,” he would have said, “bring a friend here.” In my own way, I am reiterating that

request. But in this instance, I want to put the matter on a broader footing. Bring not only a friend, but bring the lonely ones, the people who despair of companionship, the ones who lack society. Bring them here, where they are welcome. It's up to you to tell them, let them know, bring them along. We will help in every way we know.

Lastly, I want to extend our vision of hospitality one step further, and in saying what I am about to offer, some will say I have gone from preaching to meddling, and that's likely so.

When you're new somewhere, there is a kind of innocence about it. There are lots of things you don't know. You are, in a way, innocent. But you hear things and they begin to paint a picture in your mind and imagination. That's what has begun to happen with Amy and me. We hear things and they begin to hang together and become intelligible.

We hear that over time and for various reasons, some folks who used to be active members of this congregation are no longer so. Folks who used to be forthcoming, now, for whatever reason, are holding themselves back. They are absent, not here. And we hear, in our innocence, that these people are missed, that their absence is felt, and quite strongly by some. We, Amy and I, we do not know these people. We do not know who they are or why they have absented themselves. But we know that you know, at least some of you.

That being so, we want you to be hospitable to them, to invite them back and assure them of the welcome they will receive. We make this request with no reference to persons or causes or misunderstandings or anything else. We don't know about all that. It's just time, time for renewed contact, time for hospitality and welcome.

Remember, Jesus spoke about “whoever,” and “whoever” is precisely the one I’m talking about. I want to commission you, each of you, all of you, to be agents of welcome, agents of hospitality in the name of Jesus. “Whoever” is in your world, your life, your range of vision, welcome them, invite them to experience the gracious hospitality of this place and these good people. We will gladly offer them more than a cup of cold water, in Jesus’ name.

Blessed be the Name of God

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