

“Welcome”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 2, 2017
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 13 and Matthew 10:40-42

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

*Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

*But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because the Lord has dealt bountifully with me.*

Psalm 13

Jesus continues to teach his disciples by saying

'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

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our faith, our imaginations to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the word of God, into the word of Christ, into the word of hope and peace and joy and love. Let that word reside within us and guide us and teach us and encourage us and go forth with us as we serve our neighbors in need. We ask this trusting in the faithful name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

So this week, not too many days ago, I watched a neighbor load up on the annual trek to the lake, barbecue, hot dogs, a flag rolled up nicely and put into a sleeve, and I thought wouldn't that be great to spend Sunday at the lake barbecuing on the 4th of July holiday? And obviously, many of us have said, "Yes, that would be lovely." And then there's us who will go have a burger at the pub after service today or whatever it is we're going to do. But you are going to know something that they may not know. Because they are going to celebrate Independence Day on July 4th, on Tuesday, but I stand before you and want to offer that actually today, July 2nd, is Independence Day. Because on this date in 1776 the Second Continental Congress passed with a vote of 12 to 0, because one of the colonies abstained, a resolution was proposed by Richard Henry Lee of the great colony of Virginia and it read: *Resolved: That the united colonies are, and of right, ought to be free and independent states. That they be absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved.* They voted 12 to 0. The abstaining colony was New York and two days later they ratified the text and formally announced this decision. And we know that text to be the Declaration of Independence.

I love the internet because it lets you see the actual writing, the piece of paper that Lee used to write out this resolution. And on it, if you pay attention, you will notice that the word "united" was not in the original resolution. The original said: *Resolved: That the colonies are and of right ought to be....* At some point later, and we don't know when, someone, maybe in his own hand, went back and put one of those little arrows and between "the" and "colonies" wrote "united". So almost as an afterthought, the Spirit, to me, is reminding them and reminds us that what we celebrate this weekend is the fact that all of us are united. And this is at a time when the public discourse seems to be about anything but being united. The political rhetoric is about division, destruction, trying to defeat the other side and yet this weekend we celebrate that we are the United States of America.

Thinking about this celebration, I was thinking about the Statue of Liberty standing out in the bay at the edge of New York and the poem, *The New Colossus*, that was written to help raise money for the construction of the pedestal upon which it stands. These words may be familiar to you.

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

This is what it says at the base of the Statue of Liberty. And what I've been wondering all week is what it might read on the sign that's attached to that golden door that is asking the world to send us its huddled masses and its tired and its poor, and I wondered if by chance the sign says "All Are Welcome".

In the text we hear Matthew repeat again and again and again, like an echo, welcome, welcome, welcome. And we all know, each of us individually, how important it is to be a welcoming congregation. In fact, the third most important thing in a thriving congregation is that all of you are welcoming to people who visit us.

I was invited to a luncheon at Care and Counseling a couple weeks ago, and we were talking about what's important to make a church vital. And over a ten year period, all of the Samaritan Counseling Centers have been doing a survey with congregations, most of them smaller than our own, and they asked people like you, "What matters most?" The list was short. It was the pastor, the sermon or the worship experience and being welcomed by my fellow congregants. Now you need to remember that these are churches smaller than ours, so in our situation, they would be the staff, the worship experiences (plural) and that you all are a welcoming congregation. That when people come, you make space to let them be who they are and you honor and celebrate the gifts that they bring to us. If you've been around for a while, you know that welcome is an important part of who and what we are as the body of Christ.

At the litany of the table when we share communion together, Karen or I will conclude with the words, "This is supper of the Lord. All are welcome." And our new mission statement begins with these words: "We are called to be a welcoming and supportive community." Welcome undergirds all of who we are and all of what we do. Later in the service we are going to sing a hymn that is titled "All Are Welcome", Hymn No. 301. It's not titled that in our purple hymnal because they decided to use the first line of the hymn as the name, and so it says "We Will Build a House". Not the best choice ever made in my opinion. But the message is profound. All are welcome is the refrain and we are going to sing it over and over again.

But in spite of how important it is to welcome others, what dawned on me a couple days ago, was the fact that Jesus was not talking about welcoming others in this particular part of the Gospel of Matthew. Instead, Jesus is finishing up long instructions that he is giving to his disciples as he prepares to send them out into the world to find the scattered people of Israel and to proclaim to them the good news that the kingdom of God is near. He talks about them going into a community or to a home and if they are welcomed, they can stay and if not, they need to kick the dust off their feet and move on. And so rather than addressing the importance of welcoming others, Jesus is talking about what it means for them to be welcomed—the profound importance of the other side of the coin. Just as important as it is for us to welcome others, it's important for us to think about what it means for us to be welcomed.

As a 15-year old exchange student to a town in northern Italy, after visiting the principal and introducing myself, I was escorted to the threshold of my classroom, where sat about 20 students who had been together for the past three years studying in high school. I didn't speak the language, I knew not one of my classmates and there I stood on the threshold of the door surveying the class and seeing not one empty desk. I was terrified. And finally someone in the back raised her hand and went like this, and pointed at a desk next to her. Her name was Anna Vitale. She called out my name. There is no "Y" in Italian so she called me "Holgen". And she said, "Hey, Holgen, come here." And with the relief that only a 15-year old could have, I ran to that spot and sat down and put down my books and went, "Haaaa." And I can tell you that my daughter, Anna, is relieved that it wasn't Donatella Visitini who raised her hand. When we are welcomed and find a place of belonging, friendships blossom that can last a lifetime, and for that we can all be thankful.

A friend of mine, Winston Charles, who teaches spiritual practices has a morning ritual

where he goes out into his backyard and he welcomes the day. Facing East he opens his arms and welcomes all that is to come that day. And then he turns to the South and he welcomes all that is fallow and at rest. And then to the West, he welcomes all that is about to pass away and turning to the North, he concludes by welcoming all the possibilities of growth and new life that might come his way. You see, when we are welcomed by others, it helps us open and make space to be welcoming to what life is bringing us. And in a sense, Winston's practice of welcoming the north, the south, the east and the west of life is an invitation for all of us to welcome our gifts and our calling, to welcome the presence of God at work in our lives, to welcome our limitations and our infirmities and to welcome the possibility of new life that will spring forth even in the midst of dying and decay. In a sense he is talking about creating space to be open to God's presence. So just as we find belonging when someone welcomes us, we can also create space to realize that God is at work.

I love the hymn "All Are Welcome". It is one of my absolute favorites. It's written by a man named Marty Hagen who in 2000 was interviewed by Worship Magazine and in the midst of that, he offers a line—I'm going to read the whole little section that I thought was profoundly important for this concept of what it means to be welcomed and welcoming. The question was, "What kind of solo singer or cantor or minister, as you describe, best lead a congregation in this kind of interactive singing that nourishes and brings life to the church?" Marty's response is: "In early times, the cantor was not seen as the best singer, but the one who best knew and exemplified an embodiment of the stories of people, the one that the people said had the integrity to sing for them. Our concept of a soloist is as a performer who operates from a position of power and authority. In contrast, a worship minister operates from a position of vulnerability. Unlike the performer, the minister sets up the music in such a way that the people have to complete it. I open it, I invite you into it and you have to help me out here because I'm only giving part. You have to say the "Amen" or it's not complete. The minister, then, is the one who is vulnerable. The one who says 'I have the story that is so important to me, that I am going to risk being rejected in order to give it to you.'"

So as I reflected on Jesus talking to his disciples about being welcomed and the importance of welcoming, I realized that what he's sharing in these three short verses is not so much about just being a welcoming community or being welcomed in, but first he is telling them without any question that the abiding presence of God resides within them. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* That's a long way of saying God's presence is in you. And so when we welcome others or are welcoming, it is the presence of God that we are acknowledging in each other and celebrating. And then he tells them if they are not welcomed they are allowed to kick the dust off their feet and to move on. And for me that exemplifies the important aspect of welcoming that is humility. Because we need to make space for that other to enter in to be welcomed. We need to humble ourselves and not feel ourselves to be too important, because otherwise we don't make room, we don't reach out and we don't say "Hello".

And lastly, we need to be vulnerable. We need to risk telling our stories and being honest about them. It is what I love most about being a pastor, the privilege of walking beside you as you live your life and the ability to hear your stories. Often those stories are hard and difficult and filled with tears. And sometimes they are filled with absolute joy. But the only way for us to continue to grow and flourish as a congregation is for each of us to be willing to be vulnerable and to share our story with another, our story about what it means for us to be here as a part of this congregation, our story about what God is doing in our lives, our story about the ways we have failed and been forgiven. I believe that Jesus is, in code, talking about all of these things as he talks about the importance of being a welcoming people and of being welcomed. May we continue to do both in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.