

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Sermon: A Welcome Bloom  
Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook  
Sunday, July 2, 2017

**A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 10:40-42.**

<sup>40</sup> “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup> Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward.

<sup>42</sup> And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

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The disciples are about to go on a mission. They're going to share the gospel message by casting out unclean spirits and curing every disease and sickness. This is a tall order. They're going to need serious provisions for something like this. But Jesus has instructed them to go out with only the clothes on their back; that's it--no extra tunic, no money, no food. The only thing they have to rely on is the kindness of strangers. Hospitality is their only provision.

Behind Jesus' instructions to the disciples is a lesson for us all: hospitality is crucial if we are serious about forgiveness and healing, of justice and mercy, of righteousness and hope. If there is no hospitality, then there is no gospel message.

If hospitality is so important, how do we practice it? Apparently, according to Jesus' instructions, by offering a cup of cold water. Really, Jesus? It's that simple? It's that small? You're talking about the advancement of a kingdom! If something that big relies on hospitality, how is a cup of cold water going to adequately express that? How is a miniscule act of kindness going to change anything? How is being nicer going to usher in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

You may have heard the story behind the Wall Drug Store in Wall, South Dakota. The owners, Ted and Dorothy were having trouble keeping the store afloat. Five years earlier they had moved from another state to buy the store, and now it was going under. That was not unusual in 1936.

One day Ted said to Dorothy, what could we do to get some people to stop here and buy something? The only thing Dorothy thought of was to give them a cup of ice-cold water. That might be a nice treat in the middle of South Dakota, in the days before air conditioning. The towns there are few and far between, and people would like the break, and the drink of water. Ted thought it was silly and too expensive, but Dorothy prevailed.

Ted drove a little ways from town in every direction and put up a sign that said "Only twenty miles to Wall Drug Store, and your cup of free ice-water." To Ted's amazement, people were soon lining up for their free drink of water, and more than enough bought an item or two. Then they came up with the idea of paying people anywhere to put up a sign, directing people to the Wall Drug Store. The store was saved, and as you may know, people are still stopping in Wall at the drug store and buying a few things. It's almost a required stop if you are on vacation in the area.

The Wall Drug Store still lives off that idea of "free ice-water," although today it is from a drinking fountain in a courtyard, by the stuffed grizzly bear. They still have signs. There is a sign on Long Island, on the other side of New York City, but because of the highway beautification act, there are more in other countries than the United States. There is one in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on a bus in London, at the Taj Mahal, and at the north and south poles - they all point out the mileage to Wall Drug Store and your glass of free ice water.

That said, do not be fooled, it was not the free ice water that made the store a success, and saved the store from the creditor. It was their welcome, their service, and their attitude toward the thirsty traveler once they were in the store. Jesus said that whoever welcomes the disciples, as they went out to preach this new gospel, welcomed him and the one who sent him.

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I'm not sure that a sign in our front lawn offering a bottle of water would do much. Can showing hospitality really be that easy?

And, what if I don't want to be that hospitable? What if I like things just like they are? Things feel better than they did a while ago – I mean, after all, we are still standing, we are still here and there was a time when we weren't sure we would be. Isn't that good enough? I'm so very tired of committees and plans to "grow the church." Let's just enjoy the moment and let God take care of the rest!

I get it. Now that you have found your way here, there's no shame in wanting to close the door behind you. You have found refuge. If you have to open the door and share it with others, the whole thing will come apart – you won't have your pew that you sit in each Sunday, you won't have that special leadership role you take pride in, you might not even be "special" in the same way anymore.

I have thought of this, too. It takes so much more energy to create change and welcome than it does to simply show up and keep our same circle of friends and members. Yes, I have some ideas that maybe we want to consider. You are going to love these ideas:

1. I think we should take down the sign in front so that it is harder to know who we are. And we will definitely need to take down the banner outside that says "Jesus didn't reject people and neither do we." Which of course means we have to take down the rainbow flag because, of course, we are trying to make people unwelcome and uncomfortable.
2. Next we will need to find Grouchy Greeters. No more "Hi, How are you, I haven't met you before, my name is Kim" . . . no, we need to get Grouchy Greeters who are willing to tell visitors to get their own name tag over there on the table, if they want a bulletin, well, they don't really need one anyway because it's all on the screen, and, as the visitors walk to the pews, holler after them to be careful not to sit in a designated spot.
3. We should tell visitors that they won't find what they need here. We are just a simple, small congregation that will never change.
4. By way of greeting, we should tell visitors that they don't look like us, sound like us, and probably came from some place very different than we did. Are they sure they want to stay when they are so obviously not us?
5. All of the rest of us will put our coats and purses over the pew to "save" the seat for someone. After all, we are trying discourage new people from sitting next us. I want to sit next to someone I know.
6. I'll do my part. In the middle of worship, I will spot the visitors in the congregation and then make them stand up and introduce themselves. In fact, I'll turn it into more of an interrogation than an introduction – I'll ask what church they went to before, whether they are really serious about coming to this church – because, if they are, they will have to fight for it.

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7. Oh, and I'll also randomly call on visitors to come up and read the scripture or pray out loud. Nothing like public speaking to make someone feel welcome.

We can brainstorm together at our next church council meeting how else we can make new people feel unwelcome. That is, if it weren't for that man Jesus getting in our way. "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

While it may seem counter-intuitive, practice is the key to faithful hospitality. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of a nun who, although she has Alzheimer's, still asks to be rolled in her wheelchair to the door of her nursing home so she can greet every guest. Said one nun of her sister in ministry, "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to...but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life." Norris continues, "I read somewhere, in an article on monastic spirituality, that only people who are basically at home, and at home in themselves, can offer hospitality...hospitality has a way of breaking through our isolation."

James Snelling, of Richmond, Virginia is 72 years old. Every single morning, unless the weather is very bad, James stands at the corner of Maple Avenue and Bremono Road there in Richmond, and what he does is he simply waves to the passing motorists, waves 'good morning' to them. He has become a kind of self-appointed ambassador of goodwill on that corner, and every day at 7:15 he's there and he stays until 9:00 A.M.

Because he's not as spry as he used to be, he has to often use his cane as he stands there. In an interview, James said that women are generally more generous in responding to his greeting than men are. One day he counted 180 women who waved back and only 75 men. A guy kind of thing, I guess. James went on to say, "You know, I just do it for the fun of it, and what I have found is if you are nice to people, welcoming to people, they respond to that and they are nice in return."

Now that's such a simple kind of thing, isn't it, but how profound. Hospitality is simply the ability to make another person feel welcome in a sincere kind of way. In a lonely world where people are rushing to one place or another, these busy motorists were made to feel welcome in the world by this man who stood there on the corner waving to them - someone who dared to break through that barrier of isolation and dared to offer a sign of hospitality.

And, when I think about, I think that's what you do when sign up for Fellowship time – you make some coffee and offer a bite to eat and create an environment of hospitality and welcome. That's what you do when you volunteer for the Picnic and Watermelon Bust – you crack open a watermelon and you crack open community. That's what you do when you create a beautiful and sacred space in the sanctuary to engage the heart and the mind, you welcome each other and let people know this is a safe place to engage the Divine because the Divine has already engaged you.

Creating welcome starts with a cup of water, a kind word, a wave of the hand. And, from there it blossoms into a passion for peace, a role model for justice and a witness of love.

Amen.