

June 28, 2020 Sermon
Matthew 10:40-42

(Jesus says) "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."

"Whoever welcomes YOU (us) welcomes ME (Jesus)." Jesus was speaking to his disciples at this point in time, but he also speaks to *us*. So, let's think about this for a moment. Welcoming is so much more than a smile, a hello, and a handshake.

Just for the sake of putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, let's ponder being the person in need of welcome.

We have just moved into a new community. We move quite often because, well, we go where the jobs are, and sometimes those jobs are few and far between. Sometimes the jobs do not pay very well, and so we move to find cheaper rent, or a better job, or a number of any other reasons.

This move is different, somehow. We have decided that we're going to stay *longer*. We want to get to know people, and we have *always* worshiped, no matter where we have lived, and we would really like to get to know people better.

We would like to become part of a congregation, not only to worship, but to help in any way we can with whatever the church is doing to build community, to provide outreach, or simply become closer to the members. We are in need of an extended family that will care about *us*, as we care about *them*.

Remember, we move around a lot, so we don't have a lot of fancy things to wear, and we're a little nervous about how we will be accepted at the doors of the church. Everyone has had breakfast and we're ready to pile into our car that doesn't look like much, but it gets us where we're going, and we're off to a church we have never gone to before.

The doors open and people speak, they shake our hand (this is before the time of the coronavirus) and give us a bulletin. They ask us to sign the guest register because they recognize that we've not been there before. No one directs us to a seat, but there are plenty open, and so we sit down, and begin to settle in as others walk in the door.

So far, no one has spoken to us, and some even look at us like we're in the wrong seat...but not because we're in the wrong seat...only because we're in the seat THEY always choose each Sunday.

We have a little trouble following the service because this is a bit foreign to us, and we flip through pages and quietly whisper to one another about where we are in the service. We can feel others begin to watch us, and yet, no one is coming to our aid. We feel a bit like we don't belong here. No one is really giving us angry looks or patronizing shakes of the head, but no one comes to help, either.

"Whoever welcomes YOU, welcomes ME." Whoever welcomes US, welcomes JESUS. One has to wonder what Jesus would think about the above scenario. Welcoming is so much more than a handshake a smile, and asking, "Are you from around here?"

People love to say they have a welcoming church, but just how welcoming are we? How many times has someone new come in, sat down in the back, and rifled through the hymnal, just longing for someone to come sit beside them and help them, or better yet, have a seat offered to them so they could be guided through the service? And not just St. James, but ANY church?

I read a piece about a church in Northern Ireland that, at first notice, happily and warmly, greeted people at the door. They would quietly ask the names of those who were coming through the doors, but then, it was realized that names were being asked, because, in Ireland, names identify you as a protestant or a catholic.

The article told that names that were identified with Protestantism were warmly welcomed and those with names that were clearly Catholic, were told they were surely in the wrong church.

“Whoever welcomes YOU, welcomes ME.”

We, as followers of Christ, are to be compassionate in our welcoming and with our hospitality. We are encouraged to trust, to be open, to share with others, and not be manipulative with others. We are to live a life of welcoming that shows *nothing* but *compassion* for others, **without** expecting something in return.

Hospitality is like a gift of love that we give to one another. We give (or should) **without** expecting to receive. We give out of our deep love for God. We welcome *strangers* not because we *need* to or *want* to raise our membership numbers, but because of the *value* of others as children of God.

It has been difficult to have that welcoming part in our congregations of late. It's hard to be welcoming when there's no door to open and enter. It's hard to be welcoming when you don't necessarily know who is worshipping. Some of us have no way of knowing who is reading sermons or watching livestreams, so the hospitality piece takes a bit of a back seat in times of a pandemic.

Do you remember when measles and mumps were a thing? Even polio? I, personally, do not remember polio, but I *did* have the mumps. It was painful, and I remember being very sick. I also remember other friends in our farming community who had the mumps.

Hospitality, *at that* time, was offered through phone calls and neighbors dropping off coloring books and bowls of Jell-o at the door. No one wanted the mumps. And I am told that if you were in the cities, *polio* actually caused businesses to close down for a bit, so this HAS happened before, maybe not on the level it has been for us right now, but it HAS happened.

We are all eager to be back in the sanctuary to worship with one another. So how will hospitality look when we are all back together? St. James will begin worshipping together in the sanctuary on July 5. Hospitality has taken a new twist.

In order to show love for those who walk through the doors of St. James Lutheran church, we have set some guidelines in place, not to *stifle*, not to make worshipping more *difficult*, but to make it **safe**, because Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes YOU welcomes ME."

We will take temperatures, request the wearing of facemasks, and have them available for use if one wishes to wear one. Hand sanitizer will be available, physical distancing will be attempted, and the list goes on. This will *not* be a *forever* kind of thing, but it is *merely* a starting point for getting back together. We have *never* had to do this before. *None* of us have ever lived through a pandemic, and so we take precautions which fall under the heading of *hospitality...caring* about one another...*loving* one another.

Another avenue of hospitality is *being patient* with one another and going with the flow for a bit. As was stated above, we have *never* lived through a pandemic before, so some may think the things we are doing are *unnecessary*, but we won't *know* until we *meet* again for the first time.

We are holding off on Sunday school until August, simply because Sunday school members sit closer together in order to be able to hear what is being taught and to interact with each other when lessons are discussed. It's *hard* to social distance a Sunday school class when *some* of us have difficulty *hearing* each other.

Hopefully, as we slowly get back to normal, or a new normal, our welcoming habits will evolve. Right now, no one is visible, people can sneak in and out of a few online worship services without being noticed. No one is encountering a stranger. No one is even *thinking* about welcoming *visitors* because we are unsure who those visitors might be, if there even ARE any. It's difficult to send out a pamphlet inviting people to come worship with us, when some of us are not sure when worship will even begin, so it's been *tough*.

And it's been tough to be apart from those neighbors and friends that we may not see during the week, but are always assured of seeing on Sunday morning. Sundays are *not* just times for worship, but are times for catching up with one another in what has been happening in daily life. It's a time when the Holy Spirit calls and gathers us into one place to share God's love up close and personal.

“Whoever welcomes YOU welcomes ME.”

Hopefully, when we are all back together again, we will all feel a deeper sense of God’s love and grace. Perhaps *hospitality* will take on a new shape and a new feel. Maybe there will be *more* of an urgency to welcome the stranger, to show *compassion* for one another and to really *enjoy* the company of one another, knowing that God in Christ is present, offering his grace and mercy to us through our loving kindness of one another.

“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.” Amen.