

Strangers Welcome. Really.

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Matthew 10.40-42

[Jesus said,] “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.”

One of the things I've learned in preaching over the years and I believe I shared this observation in the past is that it is short readings like the one we just heard from Matthew's Gospel that often are the richest and also, incidentally, pose some of the greatest challenges for those of us who are preaching.

If we look at these words, they seem pretty clear-cut. They tell how us we should be welcoming disciples and what the consequences are if we welcome them with an open heart.

Now these words don't just appear in isolation, they take place at the end of what is known as the missionary discourse in Matthew's gospel, and the verses leading up to this warn those who follow Jesus that they should prepared for some rough sailing, that they might encounter danger, even death, that sharing the good news, that being ambassadors of the gospel will split families, sunder friendships, break apart communities. The word of God is that explosive.

So after sharing this rather sobering news, Jesus wants his followers to know that all the trials and tribulations they may endure will be worth the effort. He lets them know that those who welcome disciples will be treated as those who welcome Jesus, and those who welcome Jesus, are if effect welcoming God.

So those who show hospitality will receive a great blessing. Those who welcome the righteous will be blessed, as if they welcome the righteous; those who welcome the prophet will be blessed as if they welcome the prophet; and those who welcome the little one, they will receive an incredible blessing.

Now we are not quite clear whether the prophet and the righteous and little one are three different types of people or whether they are three ways of looking at one person.

Either way, we see that Jesus is talking about those who go out and share the good news, those who live by the good news, and finally in the little ones, those who are often excluded—the poor, the powerless, and the outsider.

This passage in its narrowest meaning is all about missionaries and how they are treated and welcomed. Now we don't too much experience with missionaries in our congregation today. I could change that. I could talk to the conference office and I'm sure they can find a couple of visit with us. I could call some friends I have in Massachusetts who been doing some incredible missionary work in South Africa and have them talk about their experience how they have been able to share the news with people there and how the people there have shared the good news with them.

But there is something interesting about the way this passage is presented to us that should put us on alert that we need to be looking for more than we need to listen carefully to the word of God here. Jesus is talking to the disciples, and as we read this passage, it is as if we are eavesdropping. But Jesus knows we're eavesdropping.

I suspect just about all of us have had the experience, as either parents or children, where someone has been on one side of the door that's slightly ajar or with an ear next to the keyhole thinking that some great secret is being heard. But mom and dad know someone's listening in and they know exactly what they're saying.

In this case, Jesus is the parent and we're the kids. Jesus wants us to hear. He wants us to reflect on these words about hospitality. Now there are different ways we can look at hospitality, and they are not mutually exclusive.

We see here Jesus treating the disciples as his representatives, and in the Old Testament community there was a concept known as where the representative carried the authority and power and authority of the one who delegated the power and authority.

The most powerful example we see of this in Scripture we read last week with the great commission when Jesus sent the apostles out to do his work

But this concept operates at a larger level, something that is hard wired into our experience. Remember the foundation story for the people of Israel is the exodus axis of brutal slaves who were brought up on it into a new land and even though God called out again and was there no go so that not one place where they've been outsiders they were going to another place in the outsiders

And they would never forget that experience. So we read a lot of reminders you were strangers in a strange land remembered experience of wanting to be well was one that was always to be with Israel s and as the church claims that story, it is one that remains with the church.

So how are we doing on the hospitality front here? Well, on one level we can feel great! This weekend we just had 40 college students from Bike n' Build stay in our church school.

Members of our congregation prepared a delicious meal for them last night; these were people we have never met before and we will never see again. But we welcomed them into our house. We provided them with a home for a couple of days, a place where they could rest and be welcome.

Look around. Just about all of you are wearing your nametags. That is an act of hospitality. It is a way of saying to visitors that you don't have to feel ashamed about asking who I am. It is a way reminding those of us who may not have total recall of every name, a way to engage in conversation.

Your Diaconate has been talking about introducing fellowship paths this fall, which will be another way for us to know with whom we worship, and to deepen our community.

In other ways we have been striving to open our doors to the community, to make different groups feel welcome here. So are we done? Have we done everything we need to do in terms of hospitality? You don't have to be a lawyer to know that is a leading question. If I ask that question that way the answer is No, we are not done.

Indeed no church is ever done, in finding new ways to welcome people into its midst. Whether these are people who have never set foot into the church before or these are people who have been members of the congregation for decades. That's right, you could be worshipping here for years and years and years yet not feel fully welcome. We all need to think about ways we can invite people into our fellowship activities, into our decision making, into our planning, into our common life.

Now when I think about this question I have a yardstick that I can use. And fortunately, I didn't have to come up with it. You all did it for me. It is right on the back of the bulletin. Have you read the Statement of Welcome lately? Let me read it to you.

We are glad you are here. We are a Christ-centered community that celebrates the love of God. Although we are of varied minds, with varying measures of belief and unbelief, we are one body, bound together in Christ. We recognize the uniqueness of every individual as God's beloved child. We seek to respond faithfully to God's call for justice for all creation. We strive in word and deed to be faithful to Jesus' model of loving acceptance. We seek to create a sanctuary where all will know they are welcomed and included.

You are welcomed, no matter your age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, race or ethnicity, physical and mental ability, or economic circumstance, into the full life and ministry of First Congregational Church, including its worship, sacraments, and rites. Join us as we grow together in God's love.

My hat's off to my predecessor Richard Slayer and the Deacons who came up with this great statement. It is bold, it is clear, and as I read it, it is unambiguous. No matter who you are, you are welcome to full participation in all parts of our common life. Sounds great, but are we there? Is this fully true for us today?

The answer is we are not quite there yet. The conversation about the topic of gay marriage, same sex marriage, marriage for all, whatever you want to call it, began while Richard was pastor here, and it continued during Elouise's interim period and now during my ministry remains unfinished. I will tell you where I stand on this; I don't think this is going to be a surprise to many of you but I want to be clear. And I arrived at this position after much study, prayer, and contemplation. Any two people who wish to come to this church to be married before God, the Christian rite of marriage should be welcomed and embraced.

I don't care if you are a man and a woman, a man and a man, or a women and a woman. If two people want to have the church bless and sanctify their union this is a cause for celebration and rejoicing. This is something that is good.

There are so many different ways we can approach this topic. As we know from developments in New York this weekend it can be talked about as a political issue; we can look at it as a cultural issue; we can talk about science and biology, but within the confines of this building, when we gather as the Church, our ultimate arbitrator of the conversation needs to be the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remember what we have said about the gospel; what it is that Matthew says to us. The good news isn't words. It is a way. It is something we do. It is something we live out. So scripture isn't just the bible that is in the pew wrap before you. It is the living word of God that you and I experience.

I could have you here all day and all night cruising through scripture on this topic. This morning we are going to touch just a couple of highlights, just to give you a framework. Let's consider the issue of marriage. We have heard people talk about Christian marriage and what it is. And yet that is never really spelled out in the New Testament. And we know that Jesus and Paul, and others in the early church, were working out of the understanding they got from Hebrew scripture.

When you look at marriage there it is a little bit different than what we experience and enjoy today. We talk about marriage as being two people who love one another coming together to share their lives. But in the Old Testament, marriage often seems to be much more of a contract, and a very lopsided one at that. I feel confident saying that any of you with daughters would not want your little girl to have an Old Testament marriage.

Let's think about Abraham and Sarah—Abraham, the founder of our faith, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Things seemed to be going Abraham and Sarah. Everything seemed to be going swimmingly for Abraham and Sarah except for one, small, teensy-weensy problem. No kids. So, there is a solution available. Abraham got a concubine, and Hagar provided him with a son.

How about David, the author of so many of our Psalms. Great heroic figure in the Old Testament, ancestor of Jesus. He was married. But that wasn't enough for him because he saw Bathsheba. He decided that he was going to have a fling with her. Ten commandments will forget the adultery thing, so David, being King, decides to makes things easy. He wants to get Uriah, Bathsheba's husband out of the way. And so he has him killed in battle.

Nathan the prophet is outraged and he condemned David. But here is the amazing thing about it. When Nathan goes off on his tirade, all he talks about is how Uriah has been wronged. There is nothing about any horror that may have happened to Bathsheba in this. Nothing about how her marriage may have been damaged.

And what about Ruth, another ancestor of Jesus? She couldn't get married again until some of the men who were related to her late husband were able to work things out.

In the New Testament things begin to change. When we look at the marriage of Joseph and Mary it is actually rather shocking, in terms of the way things were done in those days. Joseph was told by a messenger from God to not worry about his reputation but instead to think about Mary and the child. And he did.

But the New Testament has its issues around marriage too. Paul telling people who are not married that it is better they stay unmarried. There are segments in the early church that thought marriage was something that got in the way of people's relationship with God. Paul at least recognized marriage as a gift from God.

Indeed, the issue about marriage that the church should be thinking about is the whole issue about divorce. Jesus was dead-set against it, as was the early church. And yet, our understanding of scripture has changed over the years.

And what about this question of homosexuality? The bible doesn't really spend a lot of time talking about it. There is the verse in Leviticus that says that two men who engage in carnal relations ought to be stoned. But there is a lot of stuff in Leviticus that can get you stoned, and stuff that would make you scratch your head. And it says nothing about lesbians. Zip. Nada. Nothing.

Jesus doesn't talk about this issue. You want to know what gets Jesus ripped? When the poor are abused. When people stray from the word of God. When people who need healing and comfort are denied that healing and comfort.

One of things that pains me so much when I look at discussions that take place around this issue, in so many of our churches, is that all too many people on either side of the question often resort to the worst stereotypes imaginable about the people who have a different opinion. That is not necessary.

Sometimes it's true that people are motivated by hate, but the conversations I've had with people that has not been the case, when they have had reservations around this issue. People have an understanding of scripture; they have their life experiences. But we know that things change and things that were once accepted as ordained by God can come to be seen otherwise.

Think of the issue of slavery. Blessed and protected by the church for most of the church's experience in history. Remember Paul telling Onesimus go back to your master. Jesus never calls it out; he never objects to the institution.

But in the nineteenth century people in the church began to understand through their experience with the Holy Spirit that the idea that all are children of God is not compatible with some people being held in bondage.

Our Statement of Welcome echoes the words in Genesis that we are all made in the image of God. There is nothing Orwellian where some are more in the image than others. We are all equal before God.

I touch on this topic today not because I received a phone call from a gay couple wishing to be married here this fall and not because I want to engage in some theological dialogue, but because this is what came at me when I read the lectionary text. The living word of God speaking to me. And this issue isn't academic but it is one that involves real people.

Everybody in this room, at one point or another in their life, has worked with, or played with, or gone to war with, or volunteered with somebody who is gay. You may not have known it, but the statistics pretty much say that is so. And so as I meditate on this passage I think about people I have known. People like my colleague Larry who was embittered towards the church because he had been told by the congregation, which he had grown up with in Montana, that he wasn't welcome; that he was a sinner. He was amazed to find out that I was part of a church where everybody was welcome regardless of who they were.

I think of my friend Abby, who is one of the most faithful people I have ever met, one of the most powerful preachers I have ever encountered; the person I want to deliver pastoral care when I am sick and in the hospital. And in most states in this country Abby cannot marry her partner.

And then I think of my friend Phil. Phil lived upstairs from me my freshman year in college. Phil had everything going for him. He was tall, good looking. Some of you may remember Michael Cain in his younger years. He was better looking than that. Phil was a babe magnet, the only way to describe him. And best of all, Phil's father owned the local bank. What more could anybody want in life.

Well Phil in college began to confront who he was in a way he had not been able to earlier in his life. This was the big 1980s. People were just beginning to open up about these issues and talk about them but it was still taboo in so many circles we still had people walking around saying aids was a plague on gay people. Phil died of aids. When Phil died of aids it became clear that he had not told his parents that he was gay. He couldn't; he feared rejection.

We can talk all we want about how welcoming we are, how we open the doors, how we let people participate, invite them to participate. But ultimately it is not the perspective of the welcomer that matters; it is that of the one who is being welcomed.

If these words on the back of our bulletin are to have true power there can be no exceptions. If we are going to say you are welcomed into the full life and ministry of the First Congregational Church including worship, sacraments and rights that means you are welcomed to be married here. If this is not the case we need to change this statement.

One of the things I love about our church is all the history in this building. One of my favorite little pieces of history hangs out in the Narthex. Maybe you noticed it when you've come in. It is a sign that says "Strangers Welcome". For almost 250 years that has been the way this church has operated. Sometimes not living up to that standard in different ways but I think making a pretty good shot at it.

My hope and my prayer is that we can say that without any reservation, without any exception. Strangers welcome, really.