

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 13 (A)
June 28, 2020
Text: Matthew 10:40-42

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

There are two sides to welcoming—there is giving welcome and receiving welcome. There is welcoming another person into your life, into your home, into your circle of care, and there is being welcomed by someone else into their life, into their home, into their circle of care. Our gospel story today speaks to both the giving and the receiving, and Jesus wants us to recognize and experience the blessing that is to be found on both sides of welcoming.

Jesus was sending his followers out to share his work of healing and freedom, to be living, breathing signs of the reign of God in the towns and villages all around Israel. They were going out to show people what it would look like when human community is shaped by God's values of compassion and forgiveness and reconciliation, generosity and humility, with justice and truth. With their lives, they would help people see how the power of God's love reshapes human relationships. And here's where welcoming comes in. Jesus was sending his followers out without extra money in their pocket, without extra clothes in their bag, so they would need to be welcomed somewhere. They would need to find a receptive individual who would give them a place to stay, someone who would share their bread. And Jesus told his followers that when that happened, those hosts wouldn't just be welcoming a weary and dusty traveler under their roof. They would be welcoming Jesus himself. Jesus himself would be present. Through his followers, and through all the ways they revealed compassion and forgiveness and reconciliation, and generosity and humility, Jesus himself would be present to effect healing and freedom. And even more than that, the God of all creation would be present. When someone with an open heart welcomed Jesus' followers to share their bread and take shelter under their roof, they would be welcoming the God of all mercy and grace into their homes and into their lives.

What an astounding gift Jesus promises! He says we will receive nothing less than his own gracious, life-giving presence when we make room for relationships that are all about compassion and forgiveness, all about kindness and humility and generosity, all about justice and truth. Wow! And when we act as Jesus' representatives, when we bring Jesus' way of love into our relationships, treating every person we meet as a beloved child of God, we become conduits for God's life-giving power—like tributaries of a great, world-wide river of love, flowing from God to quench a parched and thirsty human family.

I wonder what kind of invitation and what kind of promise you hear in Jesus' words. We are in an entirely different sort of situation than the one Jesus describes. It's not just that we are not travelling from town to town as missionaries, like those first followers that Jesus sent out. In this time of social distancing, we aren't going into anyone else's house, especially not the home of a stranger. And we're not letting anyone else into our home, certainly not someone we don't know. But Jesus is speaking to us, through the words of scripture, because welcoming and being welcomed for the sake of the gospel are still occasions for being touched by God's blessing and

God's power for healing and freedom. Jesus is speaking to us about sharing a way of being human together and nurturing human community together that is shaped by his way of compassion and forgiveness and kindness and humility and justice and truth. And even though we are social distancing and staying home as much as we can, there are still so many ways of welcoming and being welcomed. I'd like to explore just a few with you this morning.

I wonder when you have been the one offering a welcome. Maybe in the past you were the one showing up when someone new moved into the neighborhood, knocking on their door with a plate of cookies and a friendly smile. Or maybe you were the one hosting a BBQ in your back yard for neighbors to gather. But what about now, when not gathering is a way to show love and concern for our neighbors? There are still ways for us to welcome others into our lives, into our hearts, our circle of concern. Perhaps some of us have been thinking about "essential workers," whose jobs are considered necessary during this COVID-19 pandemic. For example, maybe you've been reading about the impact the disease has been having on workers in meat-processing plants. Especially in the South and Midwest, many of those workers are Latino, and their communities are being especially hard hit by the virus. As we learn about the conditions they work under, we're making space in our awareness and our hearts for those neighbors who are essential workers. And when we come in contact with those essential workers, whether a clerk at the grocery store or someone working the cleaning crew, maybe it will change your interaction with them, prompting a warm exchange with a word of thanks. Or maybe you've been watching the protests about racial justice, and learning more about how the life experience of our black neighbors is different from ours because of how racism has shaped our country. Maybe you've been learning about the difference in wealth between white households and black households, and the factors that created that difference. Or maybe you've been pondering what it would feel like to be a black American and be stopped by the police, and learning about the changes that are being called for in police policy and community safety. I wonder how you've been opening your heart, making space in your life to welcome new relationships, even at a distance, especially relationships to cross over barriers of class or race.

The examples I mentioned are all pretty challenging, but I wonder if you can also imagine some of the blessings Jesus gives when we welcome these relationships. To be set free from ignorance, or free from blaming and judging—that's a blessing. To have your heart opened to the real lives of real neighbors, instead of being wrapped up entirely in your own wants or fears—that's a blessing too. And Jesus is present in those blessings to touch our lives, and our community, our world, with his healing and liberating power. God blesses us generously, abundantly, with God's grace and peace and joy.

I wonder when you've been the one putting yourself out there as Jesus' representative, and needing to receive a welcome. In the past, maybe you were the one who invited a neighbor to join you to come to church, or for their kids to join your kids for Vacation Bible School. Or maybe you were the one who tried to reach across social barriers to create connections. But what now? It's not just the Coronavirus that has people on edge. Our society is so polarized. It's like we're set up to understand any difference of opinion as a sign of moral depravity. But there are still ways of being Jesus' representative in the place where you are. I imagine the first thing

is not giving in to the narrative of us-versus-them, and instead remembering that every person is a child of God. Over the past few months I've witnessed some wonderful examples of people being Jesus' representative, reaching out with compassion from a distance. I know of people who advocated for affordable housing online, who've attended seminars on race relations and anti-poverty efforts, who've given financially to support non-profits that are working for change. I know of people who are making a point to be in touch with elders who might be isolated and lonely. I know of a couple who post pictures of flowers on their facebook page. It's their little way of trying to create a little more beauty in the world. And lots of people are sharing their pride or coming out stories on social media, giving courage and affirmation to others.

Now, these examples are, for the most part, pretty non-challenging, and maybe the blessings seem fairly obvious, the ways in which people like us can serve as conduits for love, for kindness, for graciousness. But I invite you to think of them as just scratching the surface. The deeper you get into putting yourself out there for justice, and putting yourself out there in ways that confront poverty and privilege, the more challenging it will be. And I hope you'll see the blessing there too, that God is already at work to heal the human family, and God eagerly welcomes you as a partner in God's gracious, life-giving work.

And that, really, is the frame within which we need to see all of our welcoming others, or being welcomed as Jesus' representatives. This isn't our to-do list, in order to satisfy God's demands, so that we can find a welcome with God. First, God has already welcomed us, with abundant forgiveness and overflowing compassion and endless grace. First, God has already made space for us in God's own heart, embracing us with eternal love and claiming us as God's beloved children forever. First of all, God has spoken the decisive word for us—you are forgiven, you are precious, you are mine. When such amazing love fills our hearts, welcoming us into God's heart, the only response that makes any sense at all is to open our hearts to others, to welcome them as Christ has welcomed us, and try to be for them an echo of the love we ourselves have received. Thanks be to God. Amen.