

Our reading is from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 10 from verse 40 through to verse 42 reading from the “The New Revised Standard.”

"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."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God

Nine years ago you welcomed Mary and me into your midst. In the nine years that have passed you have welcomed us into your hearts, into your homes, at your weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, baptisms and funerals of loved ones.

You have welcomed us at Christmas and Easter, Thanksgiving and a host of other times to be your guests.

You have shared yourselves; shared the fellowship of your table with us, conversed with us over a fine ale or glass of wine, offered us your friendship and delighted us with the camaraderie of a good game of cards and fellowship.

But more than this - much more - you have ministered to us, offered the cup of cold water, and blessed and strengthened us when we have had need.

Today's gospel speaks eloquently of welcome. Jesus tells the disciples as he sends them out to announce the coming of the kingdom with acts and deeds and speech. He tells them and he tells us today:

Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me. And anyone who welcomes me also welcomes the one who sent me. Anyone who welcomes a prophet, just because that person is a prophet, will be given the same reward as a prophet. Anyone who welcomes a good person, just because that person is good, will be given the same reward as a good person. And anyone who gives one of my most humble followers a cup of cool water, just because that person is my follower, will surely be rewarded.

And so today with this my final and I hope one of my shortest messages here at BNUC I wish to take a moment to talk about what it means to welcome another. How do we do that here in this place? How do we make this House of God a home? How do we make BNUC a community and family of love?

It was a difficult world in which Jesus lived, a world in which hospitality had a dangerous edge to it. To us, the word “hospitality” implies coffee and treats during a polite reception after service. To Jesus however, it meant far more than that. It meant acceptance, even to those who, in his society and in his day, were deemed to be unacceptable. Which is why he put his arms around lepers, ate with tax collectors and sinners, forgave adulterers, and broke Sabbath laws. Hospitality is not only important to Jesus it is at the very heart his ministry. And it doesn’t make any difference to him where such hospitality takes place, or to whom, or on what day.

Hospitality can have a hard edge however. I suppose it depends on where you are and whether you’re willing to put yourself in difficult places. This reality raises questions that our faith community has wrestled with and must continue to wrestle with.

Look at scripture; in almost every instance, when Jesus is speaking about kindness, or generosity, or hospitality, or welcome, he isn’t describing what ought to be done for the rich, or the famous, or the powerful; he is saying this is what ought to be done for the powerless ones: the children, the grieving, the discouraged, the desperate. If you show hospitality to these little ones, your reward will never be lost.

You probably already know that the word hospitality comes from the Latin word “hospital.” Throughout most of history, a hospital was not a place where someone went to be healed. Until our lifetime, a hospital wasn’t a place where you went for some life-saving surgery. A hospital was a place to be comforted...a place to be fed, and loved, and touched, and cared for. Another word from the same root has shown up in our contemporary lexicon in recent years: “hospice.” The purpose of hospice workers is not to cure their patients, but rather to make them as comfortable as humanly possible. Hospice workers are, in fact, angels in disguise, and their reward, as Jesus promised, will be great.

It seems to me that God calls the church to be a hospice to the hurting people of this world. Instead of spending so much time and energy pointing out people’s sins, criticizing them for their flaws, condemning them for their lifestyle, and excluding them until they become more like us... instead of judging them, God has called us, the church, to love them. God has called us to be on the lookout for the weakest, or the oldest, or the youngest, or the poorest, or the most lonely, or the refugee and to offer a cup of water to them? God’s call is to make them feel welcomed and comfortable. And when we are confronted with these people, these children of God, and it makes us uncomfortable, and we then ignore God’s call I think that breaks God’s heart.

There was a time when every home had a front porch and folks sat on the porch watching the people go by and engaged in conversation with them. People of every stripe; some in suits, others in overalls, young and old would go by and they would talk to those on porch as they passed. *“How are the kids, did you find a job yet, what did the doctor say, did you hear about Dave on the corner?”*

We don't have porches anymore; we have backyard decks, with fences; and so now we are insulated from people we don't know...and therefore, never get to know them. But God has a porch, and it's in front; right on the street...and God can see the people pass by and knows their circumstances. And if somehow we could sit on the porch with God and see what God sees, we would be moved to action. We would be handing out water by the buckets full to show kindness, and grace, and hospitality.

And when it comes to hospitality, it goes both ways because we take turns being the host and being the guest. Those two things, you see, are profoundly inter-connected: being a "host" and being a "guest" that is. As a matter of fact, the Latin word that is generally translated as "host" can also be translated as "guest".

Guesting and hosting. Being received and receiving others. Being welcomed and welcoming others. Those things are intricately linked in human life, since no one gets to play the role of guest, until someone else indicates a willingness to play the role of host.

You see, sometimes we are the ones who simply need the hug or the cup of water. Other times, we are the ones providing the hot dish, or the coffee, or the comfort.

During my nine years here I have witnessed the hospitality offered to strangers. We have paid the rent for folks who could not afford it, we have served food from our food cupboard, we have given rides and bus tickets, and we have taken people shopping. We have supplied furniture to help folks establish their home. We have supported people during difficult times accompanying them to the court house and the hospital to help folks get proper health care, visited folks in the hospital and nursing homes and served meals for the homeless and low income. We have helped folks in times of transition helping them to move to a new home. We have welcomed folks here on Sunday morning, sat with them during worship and shared fellowship with them during our fellowship time after worship. Continue to be who you were called to be, a faith filled community whose doors and hearts are open and welcoming to the stranger.

In the days ahead BNUC will be welcoming a new pastor and I have no doubt that you will welcome and extend the hand of fellowship to your new minister as you have done for me and Mary.

Through the stirring of God's Spirit I have been led to this time of retirement. For Mary and me and for you the people of BNUC it is an exciting time - a changing time –but a time pregnant with opportunity. It is God's time. It is our time.

Now, although my formal position as your minister and pastor comes to an end I look forward to our continuing relationship connecting with you in a new way. We are friends. Thank you for your friendship and warm and loving welcome hospitality. Thanks be to God. Amen.