

More than a Welcome

Second Sunday of Easter

April 27, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Matthew 10:40-42(NRSV)

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever 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; ⁴²and 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.”

The tribulations of travel

For the 2½ years of his public ministry, Jesus was an itinerant prophet traveling throughout Galilee with a close band of followers, depending on the hospitality of strangers for food and shelter. In doing so, they relied on ancient Jewish traditions about the reception given to travelers and guests.

Among the Jews, hospitality was a concrete expression of God’s commandment to love their neighbor. It was also a demonstration of one’s faithfulness to God (Job 31:32; Isaiah 58:7). Indeed, in the Old Testament, failure to provide hospitality was punishable by God (Deut 23:3-6)! But not only had God commanded it, the land and climate in which the Jews lived demanded that they share food, water, and protection. After fleeing Egypt, they had spent decades wandering the harsh deserts of the Sinai wilderness, where God had provided for them. After entering the Promised Land, the Israelites learned that Palestine could be a harsh place, presenting significant challenges to travelers. Palestine is hot and dry and very rocky in places. There are significant changes in elevation. For example, Jericho and Jerusalem are only 15 miles apart. Yet, Jericho is more than 800 feet below sea level, while Jerusalem towers more than 2600 feet above sea level! Travelers were menaced by lions and bears, particularly along the Jordan River valley. Bandits were a constant threat.

Not surprisingly, over the centuries the Jews hammered out many details about the hospitality to be shown travelers. Jews were expected to be generous hosts. They looked to Abraham as the model host. He had once entertained three guests, not knowing they were angels (Genesis 18:1-16). He welcomed them, offering water for drinking and washing. Sarah, his wife, quickly prepared cakes of “choice flour” as Abraham’s servant prepared a calf for dinner. Abraham even made God wait while he tended to the three guests! Similarly, Jews were expected to welcome fellow Jews, providing them with shelter and food at no cost. Even during the busy times of festival in Jerusalem, Jews were expected to accommodate as many guests as possible.¹

Welcoming and Receiving

In today’s passage, “welcome” translates the Greek word, *dechomai*, which is used several dozen times in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels. Most often *dechomai* is translated “receive.” Indeed, if your primary Bible translation is the NIV, you’ll find that “receive” is used in today’s verses from Matthew.

When used here, *dechomai* carries a deeper meaning than simple hospitality. Jesus is sending out the twelve, his closest disciples, his apostles¹, as his envoys. They are to carry the message of the Good News to others and Jesus expects that they will be warmly welcomed. But Jesus means more. Those who “welcome/receive” these messengers, receive Jesus and those who receive Jesus, receive God. It is about the acceptance of the apostles’ message and, therefore, the message of Jesus. Because more is involved than simply a warm welcome, those who do “receive” the apostles, or prophets, or any righteous persons will themselves receive the reward due those whom they have received.

1. *Apostle* is a Greek word meaning “messenger” or “one who is sent forth.” In Matthew 10:2, the twelve are referred to as apostles. *Disciple* means follower, student, or apprentice. All of the apostles are disciples, but only a small group of the disciples are apostles!

¹ For more on this, see “On the Road: the inns and outs of travel in first-century Palestine,” by Marilyn Hargis, in *Christian History*, Issue 59, summer 1998, p. 28. This article is available on-line by clicking on “archives” at

There was more to hospitality among the Jews than simply putting up guests. In the ancient Near East, hospitality was the process of “receiving” outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests. The host was both provider and protector, bringing the outsider into the community. This was a process characterized by a high standard of mutual civility and respect, much like a carefully choreographed dance.² A guest was expected to honor the host. For example, guests had to eat what was given them. Jesus wouldn’t even let his apostles take food with them on their journeys, presumably so they’d eat when served (Mark 6:8)! Jesus, when eating in the homes of assorted unsavory types, would never accuse them of being sinners or ask them to change (Matthew 9:10). Doing so would be an insult, and Jesus knew that he was their guest. Similarly, the host had to honor the guest. Once, Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon (in Luke 7:36-50). There, Simon failed Jesus completely as an honorable host. There was no welcoming kiss, no anointing, and no foot washing.³ Even allowing the sinful woman to approach Jesus breached Simon’s obligations as the host. Jesus rebukes Simon for the stinginess of his hospitality and, hence, the stinginess of his love. Hospitality was seen to be love in action.

The “Little Ones”

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus frequently refers to the “little ones.” Often, we mistakenly think that he is referring solely to children. Though he does sometimes use the phrase “little ones” to refer to children (e.g., Matt 18:1-6), more often Jesus is referring to his own disciples, especially those who are the small, insignificant, and unimportant in society. They have no wealth. They have no earthly power. They are not captains of industry or political leaders. They are the “little ones” of life, the least of Jesus’ followers, on whom God will build his kingdom.

Though the phrase “little ones” might seem demeaning to us, Jesus never uses it disparagingly. Instead, he continually teaches and shows his followers that in God’s kingdom, all our notions of power are turned upside down. In God’s kingdom the least among all the followers will be the greatest (Luke 9:48). Whoever wishes greatness in God’s kingdom must be a servant to all (Matthew 20:26-27). The kingdom of heaven is not about the ones whose feet are washed, but the ones who do the washing (John 13:1-11).

Lest we think that in today’s passage, Jesus speaks only of the reception given to himself and his messengers, in v. 42 he declares that “if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded” (from the *New Living Translation*). There are several ways to think about this cup of cold water. First, in a hot and dry climate, a cup of cold water would certainly be seen as a valuable and welcome gift. In the desert climates, water was always a potent symbol of life. But, a cup of cold water seems such a small gift too, a gift that even the poorest of persons could give to another. But perhaps most importantly, Jesus reminds his disciples that all persons represent Christ. On this verse, Douglas Hare writes, “The fact that even the trifling gift of a cup of cold water to one of the little ones will be richly rewarded is ample proof of their importance in God’s plan.”⁴ Indeed, in the days immediately preceding his crucifixion, Jesus would tell his disciples a parable about serving the hungry and poor, saying, “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

Receiving our new guests

In a few weeks, we will open the doors of our new sanctuary and welcome to St. Andrew many, many people who have never been here before. We will certainly welcome them, but we must do more. Jesus calls us to *receive* them, changing them from strangers into guests and from guests into family. When we welcome and receive them, we welcome and receive Christ. When we greet them, when we remember their name, when we invite them to stick around, when we listen to them, when we serve them . . . in all this, they will see in us the face of Christ.

www.christianitytoday.com/history/. This archived issue of *Christian History* has many excellent articles on the life and times of Jesus.

² There is a helpful entry on hospitality in the *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul Achtemeier. This book is an excellent Bible study tool and is available at Cokesbury.

³ Ancient Palestine was a dusty place. People walked everywhere wearing sandals. Foot washing was both refreshing and practical. Hosts would either provide water to guests for washing or have servants wash the guests’ feet. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples – much to their dismay (John 13:1-11).

⁴ from Douglas Hare’s commentary on Matthew’s Gospel in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1993, p. 119.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 18:1-16 Abraham and his guests</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 18:1-4 Consideration for the "little ones"</p>
<p>Day 3 John 13:1-11 Jesus' washes the feet of his disciples on the evening of the last Supper</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 9:46-48 True greatness</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 7:36-50 Jesus goes to the home of Simon the Pharisee</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

A growing archive of these studies is available on-line

There are now more than thirty sermon background studies available on-line. You can get to them by going to our Center for Christian Learning website at www.standrewcccl.org. Simply click on "Sermon Background Studies" and you'll be taken to the correct page. You can also get there by going to the church's website, www.standrewumc.org, and clicking on the link to the current study. Once you are at the Center's website you can also join the e-mail distribution list for the studies. You'll then get a weekly e-mail with the latest background study.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We at St. Andrew are committed to being an open, welcoming, and inviting congregation. We know that once we open the doors of our new sanctuary, there will be many visitors. When they come to our church, what do you think they hope to see or experience? What will they be looking for? What can we do to make all the newcomers feel welcome? What can we do to make them feel like their needs will be met at St. Andrew? Make a list of some concrete actions that we could undertake to make us a more inviting congregation.
2. Jesus uses a cup of cold water to illustrate a simple service that his disciples can offer to others. Here in Texas, there are plenty of times when a cup of cold water would be very welcome. But what are some other simple services or gifts that we could offer visitors to our church home? For example, remembering and using someone's name is a simple gift that most people appreciate. How can we get better at that? Another might be a few moments of interested conversation. How can we overcome reluctance to approach "strangers," so we can make them feel like valued guests?
3. We live in neighborhoods that aren't built to help us create community. Instead we've got lots of privacy fences, alleys, and such. We often feel like we shouldn't have people into our homes unless it is ready for inspection by Martha Stewart. Why is this? Where did we lose our appreciation of neighborhood and spontaneity? How do we begin to embrace the open giving of true Christian hospitality in our own homes?