Sunday, 6/28/20

**Matthew 10:37-42**

37Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

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.”

**Sermon**

It’s become my habit to welcome people to worship on Sunday mornings. I was starting services off with a quick welcome before everything shut down, and the habit carried over to all those services I live-streamed from an empty sanctuary. The welcome was especially meaningful two weeks ago when we gathered here again for the first time in nearly three months. This is our third week being back together at church, and the words of welcome still carry more weight than mere pleasantries. Despite the masks and the hand sanitizer, it’s good to be face-to-face again.

A couple weeks ago, I preached on Jesus sending out his disciples in his name to do his work in the world, trusting that God would be present with them and working through them. Today’s passage comes immediately after that one. Here Jesus is telling his disciples about the people who will welcome them into their homes along their travels. Modern followers of Jesus may find the whole assignment dangerous: who would want to walk (or even drive) from one town to another sharing their faith with strangers and asking to stay in their homes? And who would want to allow a roaming stranger to stay under their roof? I’ll admit that I hate opening the door to strangers, and I probably wouldn’t invite them inside. But Jesus doesn’t seem to think of this arrangement as dangerous; in fact it seems to confer some kind of blessing. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” he tells his disciples, “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.” Jesus frames welcoming someone into your home not as an inconvenience or even being sociable, but as an act of welcoming Jesus himself.

Scripture often reflects how important a virtue hospitality was in ancient Israel. In the days before hotels and rest stops were located along every highway and people often walked for days to get anywhere, it was normal to be taken in by strangers. Jesus spent his ministry traveling from one town to another, telling potential disciples that “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” and staying with disciples’ families or with anyone else who would take him in. Then Jesus sends his disciples out to be intentional in living the same way. There’s a sense of urgency about this: people will come to know about the kingdom of heaven by taking the disciples into their homes.

Most people, at least in America, will find this to be a difficult way of sharing faith. I can only imagine how showing up at someone’s doorstep asking to spend the night would be received. But we can’t dismiss Jesus’s words today: people yearn for personal connections now more then ever. People feel isolated and lonely. Having to quarantine to slow the spread of a virus has made this feeling worse than ever. Being separated at home, having social interactions mediated through a computer screen, has me yearn for face-to-face contact. And I’ll state the obvious: this church, like most churches, urgently wants to figure out how to attract new members. (This, too, has been put on the back burner by the coronavirus, but the question remains.) Churches often turn to gimmicks, thinking that they’ll bring new people in the door with the right programming, or slicker production values in their services, or better coffee. But maybe we’re missing the point. Maybe Jesus would have us skip the cosmetic fixes and focus on building relationships with each other.

Genesis talks about God creating humanity in God’s own image. God’s image is in each of us. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” We carry Jesus with us, everywhere we go. In every encounter we have with someone, there’s an opportunity for that person to see Jesus in us, and for us to see Jesus in them.

How much of a difference could this make in our interactions with others? How often are our interactions rushed or transactional? Jesus would have us slow down and relate to people. Even here in church, we could do with a new mindset in talking to people. Every visitor is potentially not just a new member, but someone wanting to encounter God. Remember what Jesus says in Matthew 25? Whatever you do even for the least of these, you do for me. Even the smallest act of kindness, Jesus says, even something as simple as giving someone a cup of cold water, demonstrates Jesus’s love. And it opens up the possibility of seeing Jesus’s face in someone else.

“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which,if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”