

6.28.26 Sermon on Matthew 10:40–42

There are some people who have a real gift for making others feel at home. I can remember the first time I came up to meet Darick's family here in WV when we were still dating. I had driven up from my parents' house in South Carolina. It was my first time coming to WV (though I had driven through it before). They were all having dinner over at his grandparents' house when I arrived, so I was even more nervous, meeting EVERYONE after having driven eight hours in the car. But I needn't have worried. I had only been there for a few minutes and already it felt like I had been coming there for years, like I already belonged. Over the years, Darick's family has continually demonstrated what hospitality looks like – their door is always open and the table is always for any guest.

Yvonne Gentile and Debi Nixon of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership define hospitality as this: "Radical hospitality is hospitality that goes beyond being friendly; it is welcoming guests with a warmth, openness, and authenticity that significantly exceeds expectations. It is intentional hospitality that surprises and delights people by making them feel noticed, giving them personal attention, and providing excellent follow-through. It is hospitality that makes guests feel so welcome they want to return again and again."

Really, hospitality is about the way we see other people. It is about whether our hearts have room for someone besides ourselves. And throughout Scripture, hospitality is never simply about entertaining guests. Again and again, it becomes the place where people unexpectedly encounter the presence of God.

That is why Jesus ends this long chapter in Matthew with words about welcome. For several Sundays now, we have been following Jesus as he sends the disciples out into the world. He has spoken bluntly. He tells them they will face rejection, that they will be misunderstood. He tells them that some will be dragged before authorities and that families will be divided because of him. Following Jesus is not a path to comfort or popularity; it is a costly way of life.

But then, Jesus ends with these words: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." The tone shifts. After all the talk of persecution and sacrifice, suddenly we are talking about hospitality, prophets, righteous people, and cups of cold water. But these verses aren't a shift in conversation. They are the culmination of everything that has come before it.

Underneath all of Jesus' words, we find a central question: Will we recognize him when he shows up?

The challenge throughout much of Matthew's gospel is that people so often fail to recognize him because he doesn't arrive in the ways they expect. The religious leaders expect someone who will affirm their understanding of God, but Jesus spends his time eating with tax collectors and sinners. The crowds long for a king who will overthrow Rome, but Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. They expect strength expressed through domination, yet Jesus kneels with a towel around his waist to wash his disciples' feet. They expect the Messiah to seize power, but instead he stretches out his arms on a cross.

It's not like Jesus is hiding himself from people in Matthew's Gospel, but rarely do they recognize him. People had become so certain about what God should look like that they cannot recognize God standing right in front of them. I think that's still one of our great struggles today. We often imagine that welcoming Christ is something we did sometime in the past. We invited him into our lives. We were baptized. We joined the church. We confess him every Sunday. But welcoming Christ is not a one-time event. It is a daily posture of the heart.

In reality, before we can recognize Christ in the stranger, we have to become people who are ready to receive Christ ourselves. We often celebrate that Christ comes to us, but we do not always stop to ask whether there is room for him in our hearts and lives when he shows up.

Jesus told a parable about a farmer scattering seed. The seed itself was always good, but the soil made all the difference. He spoke about the soil as a metaphor for receiving the word of God. Some of the soil represented hardened hearts. Some represented shallowness. Other parts of the soil represented hearts that were so crowded with worries, wealth, and distractions that the seed could never take root. The question in the parable was never whether God was speaking. The question was whether anyone was prepared to receive what God was saying.

Our hearts are like that. They can become cluttered places. We carry resentments that we cannot let go. We fill our days with endless noise and busyness. We become consumed by anxiety about the future or anger about the present. We cling to certainty instead of curiosity. We become convinced we already know who belongs and who doesn't, who deserves compassion and who does not.

Before long, our hearts begin to resemble an overfilled guest room. We don't have a guest room now because all of the bedrooms are overtaken by children, but in the past, there have been times where the guest room was so taken over by the clutter of our lives that there wasn't actually room for any guests. (Anyone else guilty?) Our hearts can be like this – there is barely enough room for everything we have packed inside, let alone room for Christ.

Maybe that is why the Christian life has always been filled with practices that help us make space – practices of spiritual de-cluttering to make room in our hearts for Christ.

Prayer is not simply talking to God; it is quieting ourselves enough to listen. Worship is not just fulfilling an obligation; it is allowing our imaginations to be reshaped by God's kingdom instead of the kingdoms of this world. Confession is not about dwelling on our failures; it is clearing away everything that keeps us from receiving God's grace. Generosity loosens our grip on possessions so that our hearts become less occupied with ourselves. Sabbath interrupts our addiction to productivity and reminds us that we are beloved before we accomplish anything. When we look at these practices, ultimately, we can see that they are actually acts of hospitality because they prepare the home of our hearts for Christ.

Jesus never forces his way into anyone's life. Throughout the Gospels, he is always inviting rather than coercing, knocking rather than barging in. Recall the story of the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. Jesus walks alongside two disciples, listens to their grief, opens the Scriptures to them, but he never invites himself into their home. Only when they say, "Stay with us," does he enter. It is around the table, in the act of welcome, that their eyes are finally opened and they recognize him.

Maybe every day, we simply need to begin with a prayer: "Lord Jesus, make my heart a place where you are welcome."

Something miraculous happens when Christ finds a home within us. He begins to reshape our hearts so that fear gives way to trust, resentments begin to fall away to make room for mercy. Our vision of the world begins to change.

Only then are we ready to hear what Jesus says next. When our hearts have made space for Jesus, and he sends us, he says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." Jesus identifies himself with those whom he

sends. But it doesn't end there, lest we think that WE are the only ones in whom others encounter Christ, as if we have a special, elevated status.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus pushes this identification even further when he paints a picture of the final judgment. With the nations gathered before him, he says, "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me." The people were bewildered and asked, "When did we ever see you, Lord?" Jesus responds, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." Jesus identifies himself with the ones whom he is sending, but also the ones to whom he has sent.

Apparently, Jesus has a habit of hiding in plain sight – not behind crowns or thrones, or amongst the powerful or celebrated, but in ordinary people. In strangers. In those who are overlooked, whom society has deemed unimportant.

This is not a new idea in the Bible. Long before Jesus' time, Abraham was sitting outside his tent when three strangers approached. He did not know who they were, but he welcomed them. He offered water, food, and shade. Only afterward did he realize that, in welcoming strangers, he had encountered the presence of God. The writer of Hebrews also remembers that story when he says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The Bible repeatedly suggests that God often arrives looking like someone we would have walked right past. That idea should make us pause for a minute. How many times have we assumed that we knew exactly where Jesus could be found, only to later realize that he had been standing somewhere that we never thought to look?

Jesus is never content to stay inside the boundaries we build, he just keeps wandering across them. He shares meals with people others refuse to eat beside. He touches people everyone else avoids. He speaks with women whom respectable men would ignore. He heals Gentiles, he blesses children, he forgives sinners. Every time someone tries to define where God belongs, Jesus quietly steps outside those lines. Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote, "Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it."

That is why hospitality is such a profoundly spiritual practice. It is not merely opening a door. It is opening our hearts to the possibility that God may arrive through someone we never expected. Henri Nouwen described hospitality as creating "a free and friendly space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." I think he understood something essential about the Gospel: that hospitality is always about making space.

It's about making space in our homes, in our churches, in our schedules. But above all, it's about making space in our hearts – first for Christ, and then for the people in whom Christ chooses to meet us. The word that the New Testament uses for hospitality is *philoxenos* – which literally means love of the foreigner. Love of the stranger. Practicing hospitality means making space for and loving the other, no matter how different from us they may be.

As a congregation, we are called to practice hospitality in this sense – making space to love anyone who is "other." We are called to see Christ in people the world too often overlooks. We are reminded that no one is merely a problem to solve or a project to fix. Every person carries the image of God. Every person has a story worth hearing. Every person is someone in whom Christ may be waiting to greet us.

When we do that, something beautiful happens. We come thinking we are extending hospitality, only to discover that Christ has been welcoming us all along.

I've had a number of different people thank me over the course of this month that St. Marks had a presence at this year's Pride festival, even offering some level of surprise that our church was there. But it really shouldn't be a surprise, because the reason is found right here in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has always gone where people have been excluded. He has always crossed the boundaries that others insisted should remain in place. He has always stood alongside people who had been told there was no room for them.

Our task is not to carry Jesus into those places as though he were absent. Our task is to recognize that Christ is already there, already loving, already healing, already calling people by name. We simply have the privilege of joining him.

Then Jesus wraps up his words with something simple: offering a cup of cold water. He's not talking about changing the world overnight, or performing spectacular miracles. He's talking about just offering some refreshment to another human being.

The kingdom of God often grows through these kinds of quiet acts of welcome: a listening ear, a shared meal, a word of encouragement, an open chair at the table, a cup of cold water offered in love. Sometimes the kingdom of God grows through the daily distribution of a brown paper bag filled with breakfast items, or a table set up to hand out cold water at Pride. Every one of those unassuming acts proclaims that there is room in God's kingdom: there is room for the stranger, room for the forgotten, room for those who have been pushed to the margins. And it all begins with making room for Christ in our hearts.

And so today, before we ask where we might find Jesus out in the world, we begin with a prayer: "Lord Jesus, make my heart a place where you are welcome." And then, having welcomed him there, may he send us out with new eyes, that recognize him in the stranger, in the neighbor, in the overlooked, and in every person who stands at our door. Every time we welcome Christ into our hearts, he teaches us to welcome Christ in one another. And every time we welcome the stranger with compassion, we may discover that it was Christ who had been standing before us all along. Amen.