

Welcome

Remember the Bugs Bunny cartoon where he pops out of hole in the ground and looks around and is not where he expected to be and says, "I guess I took a wrong turn at Albuquerque." I feel that way when I look around at what passes for Christianity these days. I'm not going to take shots at one particular tradition, nor am I going to claim that we have it right and everyone else has it wrong. Actually, this includes a fairly cutting mea culpa, because I know that both me as an individual and the churches I have served and been a part of all wrestle with this particular issue. I'm going to say that this is a challenge to all of us that comes straight from the Gospel: welcoming and hospitality.

I'm going to try to lay down three important ideas in the next three weeks. The Lectionary cooperates with me, and I've already started the job with some of the members of Session. This week we start with welcoming, next week we go to communion and then we move on to discipleship. This is not going to be the typical sermon series though, because I think that these three concepts need to become guiding principles of our life together. We will probably be coming back to them more than once.

But let's start with Hospitality: welcoming. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." What does it mean to welcome someone? I mean really welcome them, not simply tolerate them, not just treat them with civility, not just be nice to them for the sake of manners, actually welcome them? This is not something unusual to talk about in the church, in fact we spend rather a lot of time trying to force ourselves to be welcoming, at least on the surface. The thing is though, a lot of times that welcome is just that: surface. We have a dream of welcoming in people we find to be attractive, helpful, generous and useful to the church. We try to sort out what sort of person that might be and try and do all sorts of gymnastics to attract them. It's classic focus group marketing style branding.

That's the wrong turn at Albuquerque, forgetting that we are supposed to welcome people like Jesus welcomed them, prophets, disciples, righteous people, and little ones alike. We make gymnastics out of something that is profoundly simple. Like so much of what Jesus calls us to do, it's simple and difficult at the same time.

Think about what being welcome is all about. Is it about everything being just so? No, not really. Is it about your host doing back flips to please you? Nope, those sorts of things are what you expect as a customer, not a guest. The thing that gets us about welcoming is that it must be felt, and that means it must be authentic. You will feel welcome if you are welcomed, and there is no faking it.

Think about the feeling staying in a hotel, or maybe even the home of someone you don't know really well. What's it like? You may feel welcome in the sense that you're thankful for a place to sleep. Your host may provide you with a nice bed, a place to clean up, maybe even a meal, but you are a customer or an obligation to them. For you, you're always aware that you are not at home, no matter how formally careful your hosts. It's hospitality and welcome of a sort, and often it is all we can expect and what we might need, but I don't think it's what Jesus was talking about.

Compare that with staying at your parent's house, or with a good friend. A place where you feel a little more comfortable and free to be yourself. Most likely, in that scenario, there was a little straightening and tidying up to prepare for your visit, but not the wholesale sanitizing that happens in hotel. Their kid's toys might still be on the floor and their kitchen counters might still have some clutter on them, but

that is in some way what sets you at ease, you don't have to be so careful, because this looks like a place where people actually live.

It is the feeling of actually being welcome that the hospitality business mimics with almost everything it does. It is the feeling of actually being welcome that the church tries to mimic when we try to shape ourselves into something that is shiny, pleasing and welcomes us like McDonalds or a Holiday Inn. This thing about not being able to fake it is a very real problem. It means we actually have to deal with being welcoming, not just pretending, not just doing the right things, but opening ourselves to others of all sorts. Some of them might really push our buttons, some of them might look different or act different, or maybe even reject our welcome. Essentially what Jesus is saying here is, this might not always go well, but welcome them anyway.