

**Sunday, June 28, 2020**

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

Pastor Sue McNicol – Aldersgate UMC

Butte, MT

**Matthew 10:40-42 NRSV**

**10** <sup>40</sup>“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. <sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>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.

Let’s begin our study of today’s scripture by hearing what is described in the verses leading up to our reading. The disciples are heading out to act as ambassadors for Jesus. They are told they will not be welcomed everywhere (10:14-15), and they can expect to experience the same hostility Jesus often does, for he is sending them out "like sheep into the midst of wolves" (10:16). They can expect to encounter persecution and trials (10:17-23). They also should be prepared for division within families, and to be willing to put Jesus' mission above family loyalties (10:34-38). For taking on such risk and suffering, Jesus promises, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (10:39). In the ancient world identity was tied to family and community. It was commonly recognized that in showing hospitality, one welcomed not just an individual, but implicitly, the community who sent the person and all that they represent. In other words, welcoming a disciple of Jesus would mean accepting the very presence of Jesus himself and of the one who sent him, God.

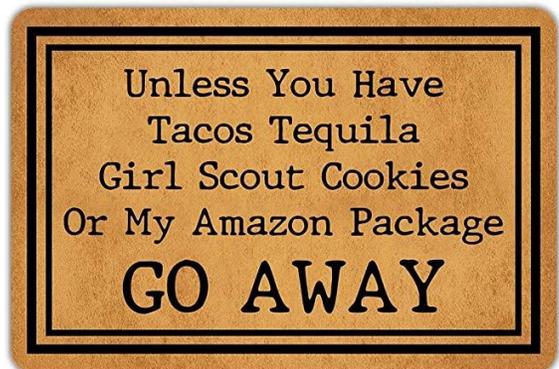
When I first read the three verses in today's scripture reading, I envisioned a door, a threshold, with one welcoming in another. The typical welcome... opening the front door and ushering in someone (longtime friend or new guest). However, when I went back and read the verses leading up verse 40, a different picture unfolded. It tells the story of disciples being sent out, not waiting on a doorstep for visitors to arrive and be welcomed in. What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come, by their own initiative, through our church doors, and instead took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them? What if we changed our ways...instead of just placing a welcome mat on our front step waiting for someone to notice it and feel invited...we place welcome mats (metaphorically speaking) in our text messages, phone conversations and workplaces. I must confess, I'm not terribly welcoming in my home life. My front doorbell has not worked for decades, and I've conveniently avoided fixing it. Afterall, all those who know me know it's broken and come to the side patio door. The only folks who come to the front door and try to ring the bell to get my attention must be unwanted strangers or solicitors. On occasion, when I know a friend is arriving for the first time, I tape a sign on the front door that reads, "please knock." And then when they arrive, I give them the instruction... "oh, please use the patio door. We don't really use the front entrance...the patio door is for friends." They have passed the unspoken initiation test and are part of the "in" group. Funny thing is it wasn't until preparing this sermon I realized I might be missing out on the opportunity to welcome Jesus into my home. Afterall, Jesus arrives unannounced (in the form of another) and would not know the patio door friendship routine. Perhaps it is time I install a functioning doorbell and truly live today's scripture verse.

Sermon preparation unfolds in strange and quirky ways and sometimes takes some interesting twists and turns...and often includes numerous internet searches (whether it's to do research or simply as procrastination in hopes inspiration will eventually surface). My preparation this week led me to numerous sources as well as a google search of welcome mats. I must admit, it was quite entertaining. Here's a few of my favorites...



I have to wonder, is this Welcome Matt speaking pun, referring to our gospel writer for today, Matthew, or extending hospitality to our new Pastor Matthias. I should hope the lesson to be gleaned is this...welcome can mean many things...we should not try to limit our welcome but rather let it unfold as life unfolds.

Here's another, it's one we might find on many a doorstep during frustrating times of COVID quarantine. It reads, "Unless you have tacos, tequila, Girl Scout Cookies or my Amazon package, GO AWAY!" There are times we don't feel open to receiving others and that's okay. Sometimes we need to take care of ourselves in order to be fully present to others.



Enough google searching... let's get back to our scripture reading. Jesus says, "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" (10:42). "Little ones" (in Greek - *mikros*) often referring to children, but Matthew uses it to refer to Jesus' disciples, especially those who are young in faith or particularly vulnerable. The statement about giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones points ahead to the parable in Matthew 25. Here Jesus says to the righteous, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink" (25:35), and "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" (25:40).

We are being challenged to think more deeply what it means to welcome another and to recognize the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us. I'm reminded of a story I heard at the retirement celebration for Pastor Dave McConnell. His wife Sally told of her experience one Sunday as Pastor's wife and greeter at their church. She said she would often stand at the front entrance and welcome folks to worship, and as the Pastor's wife, she felt she much wear her

Sunday best. One particular Sunday a new guest arrived at church. The guest took one look at Sally and immediately began to turn around. Sally invited her in, but the woman replied, "Oh, I'm not dressed for church. Perhaps I'll come back another time." Sally misrepresented a tad bit and told the woman she was dressed for a formal event taking place after church and normally she was dressed more casually. The woman accepted her welcome and Sally confessed from that day forward she changed her ways. She said she began dressing for Sunday worship as she did every other day...blue jeans and all, so that all might feel welcome. This story resonates with me...as someone who grew up unchurched, I had all sorts of preconceived ideas of what might be expected of me should I enter a church building and I experienced immense anxiety about standing out or missing an important step in the customary rituals of the service. I was so nervous about fitting in...I chose to stay away. Sally's confession and revelation has served as personal assurance to me in recent years that I'm okay just as I am. And has guided me in how I present to the world, be it in church or elsewhere. From my experience, it's safe to say this sanctuary, this space is a place where it is okay be to yourself. Formal or casual, wounded or healed, scared or strong, really young or extremely experienced...it's all welcome here! Some of my colleagues preach in robes, I preach in blue jeans. Some feel most comfortable standing in the pulpit, I feel at home sitting among you. It's about being authentic in all aspects one life. Jesus is telling us, "take that love for family, that love for your closest community, and extend it, extend it further and further still. Welcome in the stranger. Welcome in the one whose life you hardly understand. Not to change them, but simply because they too are God's."

I have been blessed by your welcome these past seven months and have grown immensely from our shared experience. I am excited Pastor Matthias has arrived safely to his new appointment here at Aldersgate and know from personal experience he and Della will be welcomed with open arms. As exiting clergy, we sign a covenant stating we will not serve in any pastoral way to the community we are departing (unless requested by the pastor in charge) and will not participate or be present in worship, events or church groups for a minimum of one year. This practice may sound unwelcoming, but it is not. It's intended to allow us all to grow in new ways, myself included. I will miss you, but I will not forget you. I'll speak your name in prayer, and smile lots as I recall our time together. I hope you will do the same.

One of my favorite words is “Aloha” simply because this one word is used in Hawaiian culture when both greeting or parting from another. Aloha is an *essence of being* which envelopes love, affection, peace, compassion, and mercy. It enfolds all we believe and



practice as followers of Christ. It’s the ultimate welcome mat...welcoming all...appreciating all. It’s grace wrapped up in one word! May you experience and share “aloha” here and everywhere, today and in all the days to come. Peace to you my friends!

Amen.