

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: July 2, 2023**

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45: 11-18

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The Rev. Nat Johnson

It has been a difficult week. I woke up this morning to news of another mass shooting. More lives lost in needless and senseless violence. This comes on the heels of the Supreme Court ruling against Affirmative Action. And it comes after the same court sided with a Christian web designer who took a fake case to the “justices” opening the floodgates for even more discrimination against LGBTQIA+ folks. The cry of the psalmist resonates with my soul this morning:

*How long, O Lord? ... How long will you hide your face? ... How long shall I have perplexity in my mind, and grief in my heart, day after day? ... How long shall my enemies triumph over me?*

In our liturgical context, this is a season in which we are bid to consider the ways the Spirit has been unleashed in the world, empowering God’s people to embody the reign of God. And this is our third week in Matthew’s tenth chapter, where we’ve learned that the “mission” we are given is none other than Jesus’ mission: to bring healing, to cast out demons, to raise the dead. In other words, our ministry is to do the things Jesus did and to proclaim the things that Jesus proclaimed. Jesus warned us that not all would welcome the liberating power of God in Christ and would see the disciples’ ministry as a threat to their own status and power. Just as he was received in hostility and treated with violence, so too would those who would follow after him.

At a point when we might expect Matthew to shift the story to the disciples’ actual mission (as does Luke), Jesus pivots to speaking about those who receive or welcome the ones who are sent out. Now, in our particular context, we don’t see many itinerant preachers or traveling missionaries. So at first glance, these comments seem irrelevant to us. How can we receive someone who never comes? I wonder, though, in light of what we’re experiencing in our political, judicial, and social landscape, if there is still some wisdom here that is fully relevant to our own lives and witness of the gospel. Because at the heart of these three verses is not the “reward” for what we do – it’s not about the “wins” we achieve or the conversions we make or even the policy changes for which we caucus. In these final three verses of Matthew 10, we are invited to consider the heart of God’s mission in Christ is God’s gracious welcome of us. Matthew’s underlying principle of “mission” is the imitation of Christ by his followers, and so the implicit command to be welcoming is grounded in God’s open-armed welcome of us.

Perhaps this seems a bit like a letdown. Are we really talking about hospitality when the world seems to be on fire – both literally and figuratively?

Where is the mighty hand of God when we need it?

Where is the Spirit’s fire that turns oppression to ashes and purifies our world of evil?

How does a cup of water change the world?

In the last parable that Jesus tells in Matthew’s gospel, he identifies once again with the lowly and the marginalized: the hungry and naked, the thirsty and the sick. Whatever is done to one of these “little ones,” he considers done to himself. It seems then, that compassionate hospitality has *everything* to do with changing the world.

But, we must be cautious in interpreting the terms of hospitality and welcome. We tend to think about hospitality as a benevolent act. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, we tend to see ourselves as the sent ones, as the one who will receive welcome or experience rejection. But the final three verses in this teaching compels us to consider the way that *we* are the ones who welcome. For all those who have been rejected by the world, whose stories of faith and experience are discarded as pitiful and ignorant, we are meant to see ourselves as the ones who receive and welcome. Here is the beginning of the alternative community that Jesus establishes – first with his disciples and then all the way down the generations of followers to us, here, right now, in this place and at this time.

When we peg ourselves squarely in the role of the sent, we perpetuate the division between “us” (those with resources and possessions and security) and “them” (those who are dispossessed and needy). More than that, we perpetuate the paternalism of our colonial past, offering our hearts and hands to those who are “beneath” us. And we do so because if we’re the ones who are sent, if we’re the ones who are the bringer of good news, then we get to embody compassion on our own terms, according to our own ideals, to the benefit of those we deem worthy. This allows us to leave our ego and pride intact, to stand firm against the influence of those who are unlike us.

What would happen if we saw ourselves not as the sent ones, but as the ones who welcome those who are sent? How would our posture change? How different would our communities look? Whether we want to admit it or not, we have all been formed by a culture of distrust and fear. We fear the stranger, the immigrant, the poor. We often begin relationship from a place of *distrust*, where trust must be earned and maintained. But, what if we began relationship from a place of recognizing the Christ in one another? What if we were open to welcoming someone who is unlike us for the sake of being open to the good news that *they* have to proclaim to us?

Theologian, Emilie Townes, suggests that “As we extend hospitality to others, we may well find that we experience new insights and hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions. Such witness can stimulate our theological and spiritual imaginations so that we become new beings. This is the reward that we will not lose.”

Friends, I don’t have any easy answers to the mess we live in the midst of every day. I don’t know how we bridge the divide that infests our nation, our communities, our Church. But I do know that God is with us in this mess, walking the winding and what sometimes feels like the aimless path we are on. Like the psalmist, I can proclaim my trust in God and in God’s care and compassion for us, even as I lament the sins of the world.

Today, let us learn to welcome one another *through* God. Let us first see in the face of those before us, the face of Christ himself. Let us listen to and feel the hurt of the world. And then, let us bring a cup of cold water to the parched souls in our midst. May God give us grace that we might extend the divine hospitality and welcome that we have received and open ourselves to the good news of love and liberty that God is speaking to us through those we receive. **Amen.**