

Sermon for Sunday, July 2, 2017

Get the Door, It Might be Jesus

In the summer of 2004, I had the opportunity to travel with IntersVarsity Christian Fellowship on a Pilgrimage for Reconciliation—the Pilgrimage took us through Germany, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia. Over the course of 6 weeks, our group studied the Balkan war—how families had been torn apart by the conflict and how now, only a few years later, community and church leaders were working to rebuild relationships in an effort to establish peace.

In order to get to know the people and the communities-- we had a few home stays. I will never forget the homestay I had in Zagreb which is the capital of Croatia. We had never met the family before, but when our small group of four showed up on their door step they met us with a warm embrace—they quickly ushered us into the back yard where a large table had been set and was overflowing with food. Even after we had eaten well past the point of being full—our hosts continued to bring out more—it turned out that they had had their extended family baking and cooking for a week in preparation for our visit.

That was my first experience of Croatian hospitality—but over the course of the trip I quickly learned that hospitality was not only part of the Croatian but also the Bosnian culture as well—when we showed up to a barbeque in Bosnia it became apparent that while we were only scheduled for dinner, the truth was we were in for night of food, dancing, storytelling and yeah more food.

It didn't matter that for many of us there was a strong language barrier—from the minute we were greeted with open arms and copious amounts of food, we knew we were welcome, and because of that welcome we quickly found ways to communicate.

In today's story, we hear the final words of Jesus instructions to the 12 disciples before sending them out on their very first road trip as evangelists.

Even though it's only three verses—Jesus packs a lot in and helps us understand our call to welcome others in and what welcome looks like.

So, we're going to take this verse by verse, but we're going to jump to verse 41—Where Jesus says “whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet's reward...”

In the Old Testament the prophet's job was to go to the people of Israel and remind them of their identity. Because Israel had a habit of forgetting that they had made a promise to be God's people—even though they had said yes to the covenant and to following the ten commandments, the Israelites had a tendency to be lured away by other “gods”...so when they had really wandered away—God would raise up a prophet who's sole job was to remind the Israelites of who they were (God's beloved people) and call them back into relationship with God. And it's pretty easy to say that the prophet didn't have the easiest job.

But in the context of our story in Matthew 10, the prophet can also be someone who brings good news—for example it could be someone like the disciples—someone charged with telling the story of faith and inviting everyone they meet into relationship with God and one another.

The second part of verse 41 says “whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous”

A righteous person is someone who has heard and decides to live out the good news—but it doesn't mean that a righteous person gets it all right all the time. It means that they strive to reflect the good news of the gospel through their hands and feet.

But—when Jesus talks about those who welcome a prophet or and the righteous, he uses a tricky word: “reward”... “whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet's reward” “whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous”

When I hear “reward”, I go back to my childhood- I think of long Saturday afternoons working with my grandparents in their garden and being rewarded with a happy meal.

I think of memorizing bible verses as part of an elementary program and being rewarded with badges and candy. (If you're noticing a pattern, yes, food is definitely a way to my heart)

But I think God has a different kind of “reward” system.

Jesus is sending out the disciples to proclaim that the kingdom has come near—and they're being sent to everyone—earlier in Matthew 10 verse 5 Jesus gives the disciples authority to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the

lepers, and cast out demons.” all of these things have a goal in mind—it’s not just about curing the person physically. Healing in the bible also has a relational aspect.

When someone was ill in Jesus day—it often meant that they had to leave their homes. People who suffered from Leprosy were forced to leave their families and live outside of town with other people who had Leprosy. but In Luke 17, when Jesus encountered 10 people with Leprosy, he restored them to full health—the healing they received brought them back into relationship with the whole community—their healing meant that they could return home to family and loved ones.

And In Mark chapter 5, we also read a story of man who was said to be possessed by demons—he was so out of control that people in the town had taken him outside of the city and left him shackled, alone amongst tombs... but when Jesus met the Geresean demoniac, Jesus restored him to his right mind and made a way for him to return home. The healing we read about in scripture always has the goal of bringing those who have been cast out of community—back into relationship.

And this also helps us understand what “reward” in this story means. The goal of a prophet, isn’t for them to hear their own voice, or cause people to feel shame for their actions—the goal of a prophet is to proclaim good news that invites those who see themselves on the outside, in—so that everyone is welcome and embraced by the community.

And the goal of the righteous person isn’t to act high and mighty and to prove that they are better than everyone else—but their goal is to reflect Christ’s love through their hands and feet and in so doing welcome others into God’s kingdom.

The reward of the prophet and the righteous person isn’t money, fame or power—the reward is when those who have been cast out to the margins of society have been brought in to the middle of the community of faith.

In verse. 42 Jesus says “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 has just talked about prophets and righteous people, we could expect him to finish with a third category—holy ones—those who dedicate their lives to faith, but instead in typical Jesus style, he flips the script.

Jesus focuses on the simple welcome—a welcome that entails offering a cup of cold water to one of the disciples. This sounds like a small act, but in reality—cold water was a significant thing in Jesus day—there were no refrigerators or ice machines, so in order for water to be cold it had to be drawn from a deep well. But if water was drawn in the morning it would be room temperature by midday. So what if a disciple showed up in the late afternoon?

Offering a cup of cold water just might require a little extra sacrifice—the willingness to make another trip to the well in order to draw more cold water and offer it to the stranger at the door.

So why do all of this? Why welcome the prophet, or the righteous person? Why would we choose to offer a cup of cold water to a disciple?

Now we get to verse 40; whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

When someone welcomes a disciple, they are welcoming Jesus, and by welcoming Jesus they are welcoming God. It sounds straight forward, but it begs a question—when do we know that the person at our door is a disciple?

The honest answer is—we don’t. Which means the church is called to radical hospitality—so whether it’s a prophet, a righteous person, a disciple or someone else altogether—we are called to cast the doors open and welcome them into our community.

Because just as the disciples were sent out by Jesus to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons in order to welcome everyone, EVERYONE, into the community of faith—the church has been called to be a place of radical hospitality—where everyone, regardless of socioeconomic standing, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, language barriers, physical abilities, race or creed, all are welcome because we are called to be a community who casts our doors open and invites everyone to come in and experience the love and grace of God.

And the welcome that’s offered doesn’t have to be extravagant—it might require a little bit of effort, like a second trip to the well or asking your family to cook or bake something—but the point isn’t the grandness of the welcome.

The point is that we choose to welcome others because when we do we just might be welcoming Christ into our midst.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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