

**WELCOME 101**  
**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A**  
**Matthew 10: 40 – 42**  
**26 June 2011**  
**Stephanie Croom**

Intro: This morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel comes at the very end of what has been identified as the "Missionary Discourse." Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the things they might expect as they set out on their own after having received authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to cure every disease and every sickness. Jesus has very specific instruction for the disciples should they encounter resistance to their presence. He says: "if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." In this missionary discourse, Jesus reminds the disciples that they are being sent out as sheep into the midst of wolves and he encourages them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. There is *clearly* a dear price to be paid for those intending to follow Jesus (then and now) – and he's not sugar-coating the presumed prospect of hospitality as they go into unknown communities. After these teachings and guidelines on what to do and what to expect as they are sent out, we come to this morning's text concluding the discourse. I can almost feel the disciples' building anxiety as they prepare to steel themselves against what's coming next. And then we hear these good words from Jesus:

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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; 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." *Matthew 10: 40 - 42*

**This is the Gospel of the Lord.**

***Praise to you, Lord Christ.***

Did you feel a small sense of relief on behalf of the disciples? Reading the entire "Missionary Discourse" I can actually feel my own stomach get twisted into a knot, thinking about all that *might* happen and all for which I, as a disciple, *might* be responsible! For me, it's not unlike sending out our seminary students on their summer internships – there is much anxiety about leaving the familiar and entering into a new community where they may (or may not!) be received with open arms. Or course, we expect that the congregations and agencies which receive them will not only welcome them but also participate actively in shaping this pastor to be. There is also our expectation that our students will learn a lot about hospitality and that includes extending and receiving hospitality; in other words, Welcome 101. Maybe we should begin offering a little refresher course on hospitality in our congregations, seminaries and other groups with whom we are associated about

the significance of being a welcoming community, required attendance, Welcome 101. But that conversation is for another time. For now, I invite you to put your walking shoes on and come with me for a few moments. As you listen to these short stories, perhaps you'll recall your own experiences of hospitality, again, not only as a receiver but also as one who extends welcome.

Clearly she did not pull into the parking lot in the correct lane. The out-of-state license plate *might* indicate that she was new to the church parking lot, her “oopsie, I’m so sorry” wave and smile *might* indicate her assuming full responsibility for being in the wrong lane. Might not. She indicated that the driver should pull around her car while receiving frowns from the driver and his wife with no indication of them forgiving the driveway transgression. She parked far away from the unhappy couple and made her way into the church. People were gathered for what seemed to be an in-between services coffee time. Putting her best “hi, I’m new here” face on, she made her way through the crowd. Literally. Feeling a bit like Moses – the crowd parted as if she were making her way through the Red Sea! No one spoke or greeted or offered a cup of hospitality. OK, then, she considers that perhaps she’s emitting parking-lot offender vibes! She obtains a bulletin, finds a seat and immerses herself in the familiar language and liturgy even though the faces were all unfamiliar. Passing the peace was perfunctory. No one spoke to her after the service. Brushing the snow from her feet, she left that place, never to return. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

Later that same year, I found my way into a different parking lot at a different church without any trouble. Entering the building, I must’ve looked a bit out of place because someone said, in the kindest voice, “you look like you could use some help.” I could’ve cried. Not only had I been acknowledged as a human being but also acknowledged as one of the “little ones,” needing a cup of cold water, or in this case, needing to know where to hang my coat. All this welcome before receiving a bulletin, before ever entering the worship space. I felt right at home. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

In Northern California there is a congregation near and dear to my heart. It is the congregation with whom I affiliated as a seminary student, it was where strong women mentored and nurtured me toward my own ordination and where I eventually came to experience genuine hospitality in many ways. It was not always the case with this congregation. Once upon a time, the organist jokingly dubbed the congregation as “First Friendly” because it was so. Not. The name stuck. Seminarians would roll their eyes and share stories about the *unfriendliness* of First Friendly. But. . . I’m happy to report that they’ve made giant steps since those once upon a time days and they have actually come to embrace that title – by intentionally working at hospitality, by welcoming the strangers, the shy and homesick seminarians, the little ones and the elderly and anyone else fortunate to find their way there. It has become a place of welcome, a place where you could feel right at home. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

My former professor and esteemed colleague, Dr. Eung-Chun Park of San Francisco Theological Seminary writes about this passage that: “. . . members of [the] early Christian communities in general were indeed “little ones” and that wherever they came from, the disciples of Jesus were encouraged to identify themselves with the little ones in the world, who are also called to serve other such little ones in the world.” This morning, we too, continue to identify ourselves with the little ones in our midst by sharing the cool waters of baptism with our newest brother and sister in Christ, Denis Peter Engel and Elena Grace Engel. I believe our challenge then is how will we, as members of Hope Church and of the Body of Christ continue to offer hospitality to these little ones? How will we offer hospitality to the other “little ones” – those who will find their way here – those who look like us and those who don’t, those who think like us and those who don’t, and those whose lives we can hardly understand – how do we welcome them – not to change them, but simply because they too, belong to God. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

In his book *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer states “Every hospitable act is an outward and visible sign of our inward and invisible unity, a unity which finds expression in the very root of the word “hospitality,” for **hospes** means both host and guest—the two are really one.” As we leave this place, I would encourage each of us to find ways to demonstrate the love of Christ, the welcome of Christ, the *extravagant hospitality* of Christ to everyone we encounter proclaiming that *all are welcome* – in our families, in grocery stores, in parking lots, in our places of work and worship, in places where extending welcome and hospitality may stretch us in surprising ways – let your very lives give living witness to this remarkable statement. Jesus says: *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Amen.*