

Two weeks ago, we discussed Jesus' Parable of the Sower and how we are called as the farmer in the parable to sow seeds of God's love, mercy, grace and salvation to those around us. Remember, I challenged each of you to invite your friends and neighbors to church. In the same way, in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus empowers His disciples and sends them out as missionaries to sow seeds of faith. In the last three verses of Matthew 10 Jesus says something that I think is extremely important to us as sowers of seeds of faith today. So, this morning, let's see what Jesus has to teach us in verses 40-42 of Matthew 10.

Read Matthew 10:40-42

When Jesus said this, He was using terms that were very familiar to the Jewish people of that time period. The ancient world respected and honored hospitality. The Jews had a saying: "There are six things the fruit of which a man eats in this world and by which his horn is raised in the world to come." And the list began with "hospitality to the stranger and visiting the sick." The Jewish people believed that to receive a person's messenger or representative was the same as receiving the person himself. To pay respect to an ambassador was the same as to pay respect to the king who had sent him. To welcome with love the messenger of a friend was the same as to welcome the friend himself.

After the birth of their child, an Episcopal priest, wearing his clerical collar, visited his wife in the hospital. When he came into the room, he greeted her with a hug and a kiss, and then gave her another hug and kiss when he left. Later, the wife's roommate commented: "Gee, your pastor is sure a lot friendlier than mine, what church do you go to?"

Listen again to what Jesus says in verse 40: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the Father who sent me." Now that's an awesome statement. We as Christians are called to be Christ's representatives to this world. Like the disciples who were sent out by Jesus to proclaim the Good News, we too are called to share the love of Jesus Christ with all we meet. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, the Apostle Paul states: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us."

So, how do we as Christians extend hospitality in our daily lives? First, let's define what this means; then let's see who it applies to: and finally, let's discuss how it is accomplished. So what does the word "welcome" mean to you? How would you define it? The *Webster Dictionary* defines it as "received with pleasure and hospitality into one's company or home; it is the willing and glad acceptance of another." We all want to feel welcome and accepted, especially when we are in a new surrounding or with a new group of people, like starting a new job or moving to a new town.

Have you ever felt unwelcome? Unfortunately, we have all experienced this at some time in our lives. And believe it or not, I have even experienced it several times in church. I have been in some churches where no one spoke to me or welcome me. I remember one time when Judy and I were on vacation at Edisto Island in South Carolina and decided to go to the local church on Sunday morning. We came in and sat on the back row, something I don't get to do too often as a pastor. Well, this couple came in and asked us to move, they said that we were in their pew! When I got back to our church in Grants, I told them that we were expanding the Methodist motto of "open hearts, open minds, open doors" to include "open seating."

When we welcome others, we become channels for God's love and grace. When we welcome someone, we create a supportive space where a visitor can enter and become a friend, discovering his or her own freedom as a child of God in the process. Christian hospitality refers to the personal desire to invite, receive and care for those who are seeking the Lord so that they can find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of a life with Christ. By practicing hospitality, we become part of God's invitation to a new life, showing others that God in Jesus Christ values them and loves them.

Now while we are a very friendly and welcoming church, it doesn't hurt for us to step back now and then, and periodically examine how we are doing. Hospitality plays an important role in our witness here at High Desert; however, sometimes we forget its importance. Often, we greet visitors as unknown threats; in church we ask: "Who's that sitting in my chair?" We may be warm and accepting of one another, but cold and aloof to visitors. We don't know them, so we don't greet them. We are not sure what to say to them, so before and after worship, we only talk to the people that we have known for years and still don't know the name of the person who has been sitting in the seats behind us for months. Look around you right now, do you know the first name of those sitting near you? If not, introduce yourself after the service.

The early church demonstrated a sense of warm hospitality by greeting new people, even though it might have been dangerous for them to do so; remember, following the Resurrection, the early Christians were persecuted by the Jews and the Roman government. The Apostle Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest the early Christians when he met Jesus. Hebrews 13:1-2 states: "Continue to love each other with true Christian love. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it."

The writer is most likely recalling the time that Abraham and Sarah welcomed three visitors who brought the promise of the birth of their son Isaac, but there are other stories in the Bible of hospitality to mysterious strangers such as the visitors to Lot in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, the call of Gideon in the sixth chapter of Judges, and the foretelling of Samson's birth in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Judges. By welcoming a person in Christian love, we never know the impact they will

may have on our life and the lives of others, not to mention the church. We must never forget that we are all here this morning because of the hospitality of someone else.

A greeting prayer of the Shakers goes like this: “The Christ in me greets the Christ in thee and draws us together in love.” When we realize that the Christ in us is also in all the people we meet, it should affect how we approach each and every day. In the aisles of Smiths and Costco, at the gasoline pump, the parking lot at Wal-Mart, the corridors of Fairwinds, and the local restaurants, we are surrounded by Christ. Each person we encounter is Christ coming to us. Therefore, we should look for Jesus Christ in each person we meet.

This hospitality towards strangers has been emphasized to God’s people since the time of Moses. Leviticus 19:34 states: “Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt.” In other words, anyone who walks into these doors should be welcomed and treated like family.

You know a church can buy many advantages with money, such as nice buildings, the latest technology and video equipment, effective advertising, and elaborate performances. But old-fashioned friendliness, of which this world is so desperately in need today, can’t be purchased with money. It only comes from the hearts of dedicated people who love God and enjoy helping others feel at home in their church. I know that I have felt more at home in churches like High Desert than in those the large modern ones where people don’t even know the person sitting next to them.

So how do you do it, how do you extend God’s welcome mat to those you encounter in everyday life? Jesus gives us a hint in the last verse of this morning’s text: “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” In other words, practice random acts of kindness.

Helping others is a spiritual responsibility. Jesus praised the virtue of giving only a cup of cold water. His words may sound easy, but what Jesus really meant was “be inconvenienced for others and you won’t lose your reward.” In other words, go out of your way to help others. Life gives us daily opportunities to offer a cup of cold water or some other act of kindness to those we meet, such as, helping someone with their groceries, opening the door for someone, calling someone who is homebound, and many other ways.

Unfortunately, we often miss these opportunities because we don’t want to be inconvenienced; we’re too busy; it doesn’t fit our schedule. Jesus’ example of hospitality demands going out of our way, and He definitely went out of His way for us, all the way to the cross! May we remember that with each opportunity that we accept, we grow closer to God. Because in our text Jesus promised that whoever welcomes someone in His name welcomes the Father who

sent Him. Each act of hospitality and kindness in the name of Jesus Christ draws us closer to God.

John Wesley said: "Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can." Now that's a mouthful, but a great motto for life; for the best part of a good life is the little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love toward others.

Why do you think Jesus chose this example, the cup of cold water? Well, it might have been because of how precious water is to our survival. Of course, we don't have to be reminded out here in the Southwest about how important water is. It's a necessity of life; we can survive several days without food, but only a few days without water. Jesus also referred to Himself as the "Living Water" in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. Just as our bodies require water, so our souls require the refreshment and renewal that only Jesus Christ can give. The first verse of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Psalm states: "O God, my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

Our acts of hospitality and kindness extend the "Living Water" to those around us. We show them Jesus Christ, and the love and grace that He offers also to them. Whatever we do in word and deed, we do for Jesus Christ; even offering a cup of cold water. Let's make hospitality and kindness a daily part of our lives, and then enjoy the blessings that God sends our way. Extend the hand of Jesus to all you meet.

Now Jesus in turns extends His hand to you and offers you the Cup of Forgiveness and the Bread of Life, and welcomes you as His children and representatives to the world to now come to His table and be renewed! Amen