

# Being Welcomed

A sermon expositing Matthew 10:40-42

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I had butterflies in my stomach as I drove a familiar road looking for an unfamiliar home. I'd been invited by a mutual friend to meet with my lectionary study group in the home of a person of great reputation. When I found it I nervously parked my car behind the low, ivied brick wall that lined the circle drive and walked toward the door along the beautiful cobbled walk and up the brick stairs to the door. I was standing at the door of the former Bishop of the Diocese of Austin, His Excellency Bishop John McCarthy.

You might wonder why a Baptist would feel overawed by a title and position that aren't even included in Baptist polity, but that wasn't it. Bishop McCarthy, now rest his soul, was a man who relied more on kindness and humility than on office and authority to lead a number of extraordinary efforts to make the universal church and the world a more compassionate place. He is held in high esteem by a great many and there I was - a junior pastor of a church he'd probably never heard of - standing on his door step.

There was a brass engraving at the doorbell button that simply said, "Come on in." How welcoming does that feel!? And also, how terrifying to just walk right into the home of someone so respected - I was too nervous. I rang the bell and started rehearsing how I would say hello.

"Good morning excellency," would've been technically correct, but those words just don't feel natural to a congregationalist like me. Then again something informal like, "Hi, I'm Brent," just didn't seem to convey my honor in getting to meet him. My struggle quickly became moot as the door swung open and a man partially supporting himself with it stuck his hand out and before I had a chance to utter a word took my hand and said joyously, "John McCarthy, I'm so glad you've come." He pulled my hand in and embraced me in a full on hug and said, "welcome to your other home."

I can't fully explain the impact of that moment. Hugs are wonderful and don't we miss them about now, but too abrupt a hug usually comes off as threatening or overbearing. Somehow this wasn't that. It was a genuine embrace of friendship though we'd only met. For reasons I can't explain my discomfort melted immediately. I felt I belonged, I felt loved and valued. I felt welcomed in about three seconds time.

I spent the rest of the morning sharing coffee, bagels, conversation, and Bible study with a group of very intelligent, kind, and insightful friends. I felt special. I felt welcomed.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," are the words of Jesus in Matthew 10, "and whoever shares even a cup of cold water with one of these little ones [here meaning his disciples]...none of them will lose their reward."

There is a reward system set up for those who welcome the disciples of Jesus into their homes, their lives, their communities. As modern disciples of Jesus that could make us feel pretty important and pretty special if we let it.

If we let it, knowing that Jesus has articulated a desire for all the world to welcome those who follow him with open arms and kind hospitality could make us feel pretty important. It *could* cause us to assume that the ideas we carry as followers of Jesus have a privileged place in the marketplace of ideas and to receive any critique of those ideas as inhospitality or even *persecution*. We could, if we internalized Jesus's call for hospitality to his disciples, begin to tell ourselves that the world is our playground and that we are deserving of special treatment. We could begin to assume that we know what it takes to solve the ills of the world and slip into arrogance. If - and I'm not saying this has actually happened, call it a cautionary tale - if we started to feel too special it would be possible for us to engage in colonialism, when we think we are doing "mission work."

I'm not saying any of that has happened – historically, socially, politically, individually – I'm just saying that if ever we hear criticism to that end we might just take a little listen before being overly defensive. I'm just saying.

Maybe what we should do is just note that this blessed little statement of Jesus about how favored his disciples should be comes in the midst of a section of Matthew's gospel in which they are being sent on mission. The section is not about how blessed they are, but about their responsibilities as disciples. There is no question that a reward is implied, but if we read closely it sounds like the responsibility itself is the reward.

As the morning wore on there at Bishop McCarthy's home and the coffee pot ran dry we began to wrap up our conversation. As the moments wore thin and time to leave approached the Bishop dispensed of the wit that had been on display all morning, got very serious and took the hands of those sitting on either side of him. That had the impact of connecting us all around the table, and he said with sincerity and resolve to the disciples sitting around that table, "Thank you all for the work you're doing." It happened in that moment he was speaking to clergy, but in that moment he could've been and kind of was just speaking to any set of disciples. "I am not only proud of each and every one of you," he continued, "I am also encouraged to know there are women and men like you out there doing God's work. What you're doing is vitally important. Thank you, be blessed as you go."

With that we stood, tidied up our dishes, made our way back to the door and said our goodbyes. I heard his words ringing in my head on the way down the driveway as much as I hear them now, in this moment. You see, those are the words that lead us to understand the real importance of knowing that whoever welcomes us, welcomes Christ. It isn't that we are special, it's that we're charged. When you are invited and welcomed into the home of another, it is the presence of Christ you bring along. Perhaps even more importantly, when we as a faith community are welcomed into our wider, geographic community it is the redemptive work of God that is being welcomed in. It isn't about you, it isn't about us, and that *is* the reward of a disciple.