

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 20, 2015

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

Jesus talks about welcoming the littlest child, the most insignificant, the one who can't do anything for you. I have been thinking a lot about welcome this week since the funeral of our parishioner Barbie Warwick who was a receptionist at Springside School then Germantown Academy. So let me begin this morning with a tale of two greeters. When I was a student the receptionist, like Barbie, had a warm, open smile. It made you feel welcome no matter how small you were. When you were feeling some stress the welcome helped to lift some of that burden. Our prayer this morning is "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things..." A spirit of welcome introduces, whether intentional or not, the Lord of welcome. Whoever welcomes another welcomes me, Jesus said; and not just me but the one who sent me. A spirit of welcome brings all of God into play.

Another remembered back to a different experience of being greeted at school. A stern gentleman met the students as they entered the school hall, not with a smile, but with a severe attention assuring that every tie was straight and wisp of hair in place. Instead of a spirit of welcome, this was a spirit of compliance. Welcome entails humility. Compliance is based upon dominance. The one who demands compliance is not looking for respect but for submission. Power is in the hand that wields it. Might makes right. That is the spirit of compliance.

Jesus and his disciples are passing through Galilee on their way to Jerusalem. He is telling his followers that he will be unwelcome there. To the great leaders of Rome and Jerusalem Jesus will be a reproof to their thoughts as the Wisdom of Solomon understood. The very sight of Jesus would be a burden to them. The Empire's spirit of compliance will condemn Jesus. They

will have to kill him. They did not know the secret purposes of God and the disciples were afraid to ask. On the third day Jesus would rise again. The power of God's love and welcome is just too strong.

To the frightened disciples Jesus asks what they were arguing about on the way? Now the disciples had been talking about where each of them stood in relation to the other. Which of them was the greatest? Who wields the power? Who has the right to demand submission? Understandably, they were mirroring the empire's spirit of compliance. Then Jesus sits down. Whenever Jesus sits down to talk in the Gospel of Mark you know you have some serious teaching coming up. Jesus' sitting down means "pay attention." Jesus brings into his circle not the dominant and the powerful. Instead, he chooses a child. This is not an act of sweetness. Our society's value of caring for children and providing for students (even though we are often poor at living up to that value) runs counter to the culture of Jesus' time. In that day, children were to be found at the very bottom of social and economic worth. They had no status or rights. They were defenseless and dependent. It is this creature that Jesus sets before his disciples. "Whoever welcomes one such child," he said, one who has no worth or rights, "welcomes me." What a strange saying. But Jesus gives himself as an example. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." A spirit of welcome entails humility. It puts one at the service of another no matter how insignificant that person might be.

So where does this leave us? We have some discernment to do. Will we choose a spirit of compliance or a spirit of welcome? The disciples appear to aspire to greatness. Dominance over others arises out of a spirit of compliance. Jesus would have his disciples aspire to service in a spirit of welcome. The question then becomes, which is the greater wisdom, compliance or welcome?

It seems to be a matter of human nature that whenever people gather together there will be disagreement and even conflict. Someone said the definition of a dysfunctional family is any gathering greater than one. A spirit of compliance brings order. It may be easier to live in a society that expects compliance. There are certainly fewer questions. Freedom brings with it anxiety. So a spirit of compliance may quiet our uncertainties. The dangerous

underside of compliance is covetousness of the power that subdues. It is the selfish ambition that seeks greatness over others.

You can see how Jesus' teaching of welcome might undermine the compliant order of things. Instead of compliance Jesus teaches respect even for the one who has nothing. Jesus would raise up the lowest by welcoming them. They would no longer know their place, as the saying goes. The order of things is disturbed. This is why Jesus is seen as dangerous. It is why Christians are persecuted in compliant societies. The Christian faith introduces the anxiety that comes with freedom. In his letter to the Galatians Paul exclaims, "For freedom Christ has set us free." We can handle the anxiety of freedom because we know the welcome of God. We pray: "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things..."

The Letter of James concludes this discernment between welcome and compliance by urging: "Draw near to God, that is, welcome God into your hearts, and God will draw near to you. It is the God of peace and promise that calms our human gatherings, not enforced compliance. The God of love comes to us in Christ open and vulnerable, undefended and last of all, as Jesus said. That is the only way that love can come. And we welcome it.

Jesus sends us out to tell the Good News the same way. I like to call it "welcome evangelism." Jesus sends his followers un-defended and vulnerable. It is among the defenseless that Jesus himself is present. He asks those who would tell of their faith to carry nothing with them so that they are dependent upon the welcome of others. Once someone welcomes a follower of Jesus, they welcome Jesus himself and the one who sent him. Jesus would not have us coerce another to faith. Rather it is through welcome that Jesus is brought into the life of others.

Today is "Welcome Sunday" at Saint Paul's. It is not just a welcome back from the summer or a welcome for the first time for those who are new. But welcome defines who we are as Christians. The way students were received at school was enough to demonstrate the spirit of welcome versus the spirit of compliance. We welcome our Godly Play Sunday school students into a circle where all are equal and respected. Jesus takes the road of welcome,

even though a society based upon compliance would have to get rid of him. Pay attention, he said. If you follow my way your life will be about welcome. You will not keep the lowly in their place but raise them up. You will live into freedom with a faith that will help to bear its anxiety. You will allow yourself to be vulnerable so that others can receive you with welcome. And at the end God will welcome you by sheer grace into a love that is forever.

Amen.