

June 28, 2020

In the summer of 2004 I was between my junior and senior year in college and I had the opportunity to travel with a group of other college students to Germany, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia. The trip was organized through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and we were studying how war had torn communities apart in Germany during World War II, and in the Balkans, during the Balkan war.

Our trip started in Germany, and after spending a few days in Munich and Dachau, we took a train through the alps to Croatia. Six of us piled into a sleeper car—there were bunks, floor to ceiling on either side with a very narrow passage in between. But for us, the lack of space didn't matter because we were tired and ready for bed. What we weren't ready for was getting woken up every time we crossed a boarder so that the agent could check our passports....

Needless to say when we arrived in Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia, we were not very well rested, and were in desperate need of showers....

Unfortunately our day was only beginning—our group was large, about 30 in total, and the bus rental company didn't quite know what to do with a big, loud group of Americans...So after a few hours of our leaders negotiating we finally had a bus.

All of this delay caused us to arrive to our home stays hours after the families had anticipated our arrival.

Our large group broke up into smaller groups and we made our way to the houses where we would stay, hoping and praying we could shower and fall into bed.

As the group I was in entered our home stay, our host quickly ushered us through the living room, not to the rooms where we would stay, but out onto

a back patio where a long table was waiting. This table was piled high with platters upon platters of food.

As the food was passed around our host would say, “take, eat, this was made by my mother,” “take eat, this was made by my aunt”, “you have to try this, this was made by my cousin.” As it turned out, our host’s extended family had been cooking and baking for the whole week anticipating our arrival.

And as the food was passed around, suddenly bottles and more bottles of “Rakia” appeared on the table—Rakia is a fruit brandy and is a specialty in the Balkans.

Suddenly our tired and worn out band of travelers, quickly livened up, as our hosts plied us with food, drink, and most of all stories. We sat for hours and slowly our conversations loosened and laughter bubbled up and instead of sitting with strangers it felt as though we had found our way home.

That night happened 16 years ago this summer and a whole ocean and a few thousand miles from here in St. Louis MO--I admit that I do not remember our hosts name from that night, but the welcome they gave our group lives on in my memory as a time when a complete stranger welcomed me into their home in a way that made me feel seen and loved.

As I read today's passage from Matthew 10.40-42—the image of that table and the welcome I received flooded my mind—because in these three short verses Jesus reframes what it means not only to be welcomed but to welcome others into our community.

At the beginning of Matthew chapter 10, Jesus prepares the disciples for their first trip out into the community to share the good news that God's kingdom has come near.

Jesus warns them that their message will not always be well received—
“See, I am sending out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as
serpents and innocent as doves”.

But Jesus also makes promises of God’s love and care: “Are not two
sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart
from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted...So do
not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

It’s at the end of these warnings and promises that we hear Jesus words
about welcoming the disciples.

Now, in my NRSV Bible, there’s a title right above Matthew 10.40-42 and
the title is “rewards”. The titles that we see throughout the bible are not
actually part of the original text—if you go back to the Greek manuscript for
the New Testament, those titles don’t appear—in fact, in the original Greek
there are no chapters, or even verses, not to mention a severe lack of
punctuation so that the Greek words simply run together. So chapters,

verses, punctuation and yes titles were put in by people as they translated the Greek into English in order to help make sense of what we're reading.

Some of those are helpful—especially the punctuation--but in this case a better title might be a question “whom are we welcoming?”...

Because this is the questions Jesus answers at the beginning of verse 40, Jesus says “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

So when someone opens their doors and welcomes the disciples in, they are also welcoming Jesus and in so doing welcoming God into their midst...

In the next three verses Jesus talks about welcoming a prophet in the name of a prophet, a righteous person in the name of a righteous person, and “one of these “little ones”. There are questions about who Jesus is talking about—are these all different terms for disciples? Does “little ones”

refer to children? Or is Jesus comparing the disciples to the innocence of children?

But instead of dissecting what each group means—what if the point is this: welcome those who show up at your door because when you do, you're welcoming God..

I think back to that summer night in Croatia...

I was a complete stranger entering their home, but at their threshold there was no litmus test as to what I believed, there were not questions about whether I agreed on certain issues—they threw open their doors, welcoming me in not only with a cup of cool water but with Rakia and food piled high.

Now I have no idea if our host saw God in our tired, slightly grumpy, band of travelers—but I do know that the welcome I received by our host pointed me closer to the face of God.

That is the tricky part of this text...Because while Jesus is speaking a message about what the host will receive when welcoming the disciples—the sneaky part is that the disciples will also catch a glimpse of God's presence through welcome they receive.

I have to admit that this is an odd text to preach--during the time of Corona Virus—because as of right now the doors to our physical church building remain shut and since March we have only been able to gather digitally.

How do we welcome others into our midst when we can't physically be together?

In trying to answer this question—I thought back to how I've seen this congregation and all of you respond in light of the corona virus.

Since social distancing started our session has worked to contact each one of our members—through phone calls, emails and notes, these efforts have resulted in conversations and some people being reconnected.

Many of you have made casseroles for the St. Patrick Center, made masks for each other and for the community and have donated food items for Isaiah 58.

These are all ways you have worked to extend welcome to each other as well as to the community.

So I wonder, how else might we imagine extending welcome to the community around us during these chaotic and uncertain times? How might we throw our virtual doors open to our community trusting that when we choose welcome we are inviting God's presence more fully and completely into our midst.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen

A sermon preached by
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