So it is the case that the passage for this morning from Matthew 10 is set within the story about Jesus sending out his disciples to represent the message of good news—just as we have done this morning.

And, as we heard last week, part of those instructions is to not let people intimidate them. There is nothing to hide and if you are threatened with losing everything, just remember that even if you do, you are worth way more than anything you could ever lose. After all, as we heard last week, “God’s eye is on the sparrow and I know God watches you.”

Don’t be intimidated,” Jesus says because (Matthew 10.40-42) …

“Those who welcome you also welcome me, and those who welcome me welcome the One who has sent me. Those who welcome prophets just because they are prophets will receive the reward reserved for the prophets themselves; those who welcome holy people just because they are holy will receive the reward of the holy ones. The truth is, whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones just for being a disciple will not lack a reward.”

**SERMON: Welcome**

When I first was reading this I was thinking that this is all part of the instruction to the disciples about how they are supposed to welcome other people.

And that is true later in Matthew. Matthew 25 says …

“Come, you blessed of my Abba God! Inherit all that is prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.” Then the just ones will ask, “When did se see you hungry and feed you, or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in …” Then the ruler will answer them, “The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it for me.”
But here in Matthew 10 it is not about welcoming other people. It’s about what there is to learn by being welcomed.

Before the disciples get into the hospitality business they first had to learn what it meant to be out on the road, vulnerable, the objects of intimidation, and dependent on the kindness of strangers. Then they would know what welcome means.

Maybe before we can really, authentically, genuinely welcome other people we need to know – or to remember – what it means, how it feels, what it takes to be welcomed.

Sometimes I worry that we have become so comfortable in this place – so free and easy with our welcome -- that we take it for granted and have forgotten what it feels like to be new, to be a stranger, to show up without any confidence that you will be welcomed here.

Nationally, we can quote those beautiful words by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me
I lift my lamp beside that golden door.”
These are beautiful words but they ring hollow because as a nation we seem to forget that we are the children of those huddled masses; the grandchildren of strangers; the offspring of immigrants and refugees. Once welcomed, something in us seems to want to slam that “golden door” shut on anyone else. We do not remember our own stories of welcome – or we choose to forget.

It’s always intrigued me that the writer of Ephesians would say: “Remember that at one time you were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” It seems like that would be something you might want to forget. But that early community of Jesus, with all its messy diversity, is instructed to remember. Do not take the gift of welcome – “grace” Ephesians calls it -- for granted because you know what it is to be a stranger. [Ephesians 2.12]

The great analyst of the contemporary church, Diana Butler Bass says: True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather it is a central practice of Christian faith – something Christians are called to do for the sake of the thing itself.
Welcome is both what we have to offer and the testimony of what we have received.

When I think about what it means to be a welcoming place I have to remember what it was like to be beat up in a parking lot by someone who claimed to love me. And what it felt like to wander around the streets of Chicago with no money and no place to go. What it felt like for someone I barely knew to take me in. And what it felt like to walk into a church community again and to wonder if I would ever really be welcome.

The book of Leviticus is home to the famous, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and it follows that up with that line, like Ephesians, “You shall love the alien as yourself because you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” [Leviticus 19.18 & 33-34]

I am convinced that what it means for us to be a welcoming church comes out of your own experience of being welcomed.

So when we are serving food to our neighbors in the parking lot on Friday – some of whom are living on the streets or in shelters, some of whom will be strange to us – when we welcome them, remember what it meant the day a stranger welcomed you.

We are inviting you this year to think of the 4th of July Picnic as an ‘expanded Communion,’ where the welcome of this table is extended out to the folding tables in the parking lot and that little bit of bread and cup we share on Communion Sundays is multiplied into pans of food and gallons of drink to fill the tables where we all are welcomed and where we welcome our neighbors as we would Jesus himself.

About half-way through seminary I started losing my faith in the church. I wondered if churches really mattered; if there was anything really going on that meant anything to anyone; if it was all a waste of time.

And about that time, a professor assigned us to read the story of Le Chambon by Philip Hallie.

It’s the story of a little Protestant church in south-central France and about how this little community in an out-of-the-way place welcomed and managed to save 5000 Jewish lives (mostly children) from the Holocaust during WWII.
I have talked about this story before because the story has stuck with me whenever I’m feeling unsure about what it is we think we are supposed to be accomplishing together.

Here they were doing everyday churchy things like studying the Bible together and eating together and praying together.

And then one day a Jewish child arrived on their doorstep and immediately they knew – from all that Bible Study and sharing the table and praying together – what they had to do. It all added up to a dangerous form of welcome.

Perhaps they remembered their own history too, as religious refugees, who had been hunted down and harassed and killed and they knew what it meant to them and to their ancestors to be welcomed.

So, at the risk of their own lives, they welcomed those who were running for their lives.

It is a remarkable story about courage and consciousness and a commitment to the sometimes dangerous lengths welcome can lead us.

Once when Philip Hallie was telling this story, a tall woman at the back of the assembly room asked if this particular town was the Le Chambon of south-central France. “Yes,” he said, and then the woman seemed to crumple and was silent for a minute before she said …

Well, you have been speaking about the village that saved the lives of all three of my children.” … She came to the front of the room, turned to face the audience and said, “The Holocaust was storm, lightning, thunder, wind, rain, yes. And Le Chambon was the rainbow.”

While she and I looked at each other … I said, “the rainbow,” and she nodded slowly. We understood each other. We understood that the rainbow is one of the richest images in the Bible. The rainbow is the sign God put up in heaven after the great Flood. The sign meant: “…never again…” and ever since the Holocaust [we] have been repeating that phrase.

The rainbow reminds God and man that life is precious to God, Hallie writes, that God offers not only sentimental hope, but a promise that living will have the last word, not killing. The rainbow means realistic hope …
For that woman whose three daughters were saved by the villagers, history is not hopeless, because of the unshakeable fact that lives were saved in Le Chambon.

I’ll admit that, as images go, I get it that the rainbow can seem silly and trite. On occasion I have been known to say that I am somewhat over rainbow.

But even if the rainbow lost all of its meaning to everyone else, it should still mean something to us …
It is a commitment to the promise of ‘never again.’
It is a celebration of the beauty of diversity – a beauty that should be celebrated and not just tolerated.
It’s a call to a kind of welcome that saves lives.
It’s the story of realistic hope.
And it’s a reminder that one day someone welcomed you.

It’s a rainbow.

In the 1980s, when Julian Rush wanted to write a new hymn about diversity for the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church, he wrote about rainbows. That might not be that remarkable now but he wrote the hymn while he was Director of the Colorado AIDS project and after the church he had been serving “decided he was no longer fit to be their minister and stopped paying his salary.” I suspect Julian might have decided that the church didn’t really matter anymore.

Instead, he wrote:

In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways,
Who will lead the pilgrim peoples wandering in their separate ways?
God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar,
We your people, ours the journey now and ever, now and evermore.

And so, this morning, with Julian and the people of Le Chambon; with our friends marching in the parade; in anticipation of those we will welcome on Friday morning to the parking lot and in thanksgiving for anyone who has ever truly welcomed you, we sing: “God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar.”

And today, as we sing, if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.
NOTES
COMMISSIONING (Pride Marchers)
As it turns out, the passage from Matthew for this morning comes from the story of Jesus commissioning and sending out his disciples. “As you go,” Jesus says, “proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you have received, freely give.”

That’s a tall order. And Jesus sent them out anyway. This morning we sent out those who are marching in the Pride parade on our behalf. (Stand) As we sing we will send you off ‘marching in the light of God.’ (Invite everyone to stand)

So we send you out with this blessing:
May you go out with the confidence that you really have good news to share
And in the promise that love’s presence is already here.
Go in the power that
Promises to heal the incurable,
Gives life to the lifeless,
Offers new beginnings to those who have given up,
And proclaims freedom to those who are imprisoned by fear.
And know that, as we send you off, we are right behind you marching in the light and love that is God … Let’s sing …