

Our Call to Genuine Hospitality
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Matthew 10: 40-42

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Good morning Church and Happy Pride Day. This has been a full month of activities and celebrations even while in stay home/ stay safe mode; Many of us recognized and celebrated Juneteenth—some for the first time. Others celebrated solstice, Father’s Day, and new graduates. Somehow all these celebrations were squeezed in between marches, rallies, and conversations on how Black Lives must Matter if this country wants to heal from its original sin of slavery and genocide of indigenous people. All our celebrations and conversations have been in ways we’ve never experienced before. So, if you are feeling tired, exhausted and unsure of next steps—there’s good reason and you are in good company.

Our scripture for today is about genuine welcome and hospitality. Genuine welcome is more than saying you are welcome, when you really wish those at your door would move along so your life can get back to normal. Many churches have a strategically placed welcome sign. Somewhere close to the main door or entrance to the sanctuary we find the words, **All Are Welcome**. Yet, many of us know that is a lie. Too often my LGBT sisters and brothers have been turned away at the door. Or soon upon entering been told, God loves the sinner but hates the sin. I would dare say that is not a genuine welcome.

At one point in our history, people would say that 11 AM is the most segregated hour in this country. That would be the hour that African Americans would go to Black churches and Euro-Americans would go to white churches. If one would go across town or across the railroad tracks to the other church, there may be an initial smile from the usher at the door while leading the visitor to a seat in the back. And, during the meet and greet no one would take the time to make the visitor feel at home or welcomed. So while followers of Jesus have a mandate to welcome the stranger, many Christians do not take it seriously.

At SFBC welcoming the stranger is one of our affirmations of faith. It is at the core of who we are. Our congregation has adopted the statement that:

We will welcome the stranger, including immigrants and refugees, as our Scriptures instruct. We will explore how to support their causes and advocate for justice, remembering that many of us are the children of immigrants and refugees.

Now it was relatively easy to write and adopt this statement as one of our affirmations of faith. The hard work is making it live in the hearts and actions of our community. But the first step is knowing that welcoming the outsider is a mandate for following the way of Jesus.

Our mandate for genuine welcome and hospitality is found in Matthew chapter 10. This entire chapter is about mission. Today we speak of outreach instead of using the word mission. We hear the word mission and think of missionaries proselytizing people of color and stripping them of their culture and their faith. Matthew chapter 10 defines mission or outreach differently. Here mission means to:

- heal the sick, raise the dead, and welcome the outcasts,
- Don't worry about what to say, trust God to give you the words you need.
- Realizing, that even your family members will not understand the path you are on. Yet, follow the way of Jesus anyhow.
- Lastly, mission or outreach is all about welcome and hospitality. Welcoming the stranger is a God thing. Those who welcome others in Jesus' name will in turn be blessed and welcomed by God.

The questions ringing loudly in my head today are, what does genuine welcome look like in the era of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter? How do we offer a place of welcome when most of our community experience is by Zoom? How do we extend a welcome to Black, Indigenous, and other POC when we are afraid of saying the wrong thing? Can we really show genuine hospitality **and** maintain control over **everything**? Theologian Dr. Emilie Townes wrote in Feasting on the Word,

Indeed, the elements of our compassionate welcome are found in the paradox of our lives when human relationships of closeness, warmth, depth, and durability are also tinged with our alienation from each other."

In other words, we wrestle with this tension of how to be close and broaden our community when there is mistrust and a history of alienation.

These days it may not be easy to show hospitality. Being a place of welcome takes time and preparation. But, compassionate welcome need not include a massive spread of culinary delights in a mansion. Compassionate welcome can at times be a kind word to someone looking lost. Genuine welcome is doing your homework to know what Juneteenth is really all about—the good the bad and the ugly. Genuine welcome is doing the work to find out why the confederate flag is so offensive to Black people and why we feel threatened when we see it. Genuine welcome is listening to someone else's story without you having to be the hero.

And, that fear of saying the wrong thing—stop going there. It is going to happen. But if you have done your homework, on justice-making, bridging cultural differences, and being anti-racist, then you will get closer to saying the right things.

The hard work of justice making begins with conversations. We say what we know and then listen to other's stories and learn from their experiences. We open our ears and our hearts without forming a rebuttal, even when the truth hurts and challenges our privileges. The closer we get to justice making the closer we get to genuine hospitality and welcome.

Yes, we feel tension when showing genuine welcome. Hospitality can be inconvenient, because that means taking time to know others at the table. In our quest for efficiency, we just want to get on with the main agenda and skip the hospitality welcome part. Well, here is a news flash—hospitality and genuine welcome takes time. If we skip the time it take to offer an authentic welcome, real community will not happen.

Real welcome also calls for sharing power and influence. Real welcome just might mean removing oneself from a seat of privilege at the table. Recently, Alexis Ohanian, also known as the husband of tennis star Serena Williams, gave up his seat on the board of directors at his company Reddit a social media website. Ohanian co-founder of Reddit asked that he be replaced by a black director.

What we have learned in this Black Lives Matter season, is that getting to a place of equality (genuine welcome) will mean significant inconvenience for some who have always held power. Genuine hospitality means everyone has a seat at the table. Genuine hospitality means every voice is heard and

valued. Just because you have been on a particular ministry, commission, or board for 10 years does not mean you are entitled to be on that board for the next 10. I'm just saying what I know.

Dr. Townes again wrote:

It is important to acknowledge that in oppressive conditions, superficial hospitality alone is an insufficient response. The one who welcomes often continues to be at home and retains a good measure of control; this causes us to welcome those who are dispossessed, the little ones, into our own worlds on terms we ourselves have crafted.

In other words, welcoming others means giving up control that sets the conditions of that welcome.

We live in a world hungry to know God; hungry for purpose; hungry for justice and peace. The church of Jesus Christ can offer all this and more. We just have to decide we want to follow the way of Jesus and not our own agendas.

By offering genuine/ compassionate welcome we may be offering something new for ourselves. One thing we may find is space for repentance and forgiveness. None of us is perfect. We have our blind spots of bigotry. Yes, I have them too. But once made aware of them, we have to forgive ourselves for not noticing them and vow to see life differently and make different choices.

Offering genuine welcome may feel unfamiliar and disjointed. But the grace of practicing genuine hospitality is experiencing the presence of God in new ways. It is hearing how God shows up for others in the midst of heart ache and denial. The grace of genuine hospitality is learning survival skill that others mastered generations ago. The blessings we receive when offering genuine welcome is realizing God's grace really is sufficient and God's grace is amazing.

One of my favorite passages of scripture is Hebrews 13:2,

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Our goal in being benevolent is to help others. Yet, in the act of giving, we end up receiving the greater blessing. With all that we have; all that we know; all that we say; we are the ones really in need. For we are often bankrupt of courage, passion, and joy. The spiritual says is not my mother, father, sister, brother, but it's me O, Lord standing in the need of prayer.

We long to experience genuine welcome and to find a place to call home. Home is a place of love, compassion, belonging, forgiveness, justice and joy. Home is a place where all God's children are welcome—lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual people, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, White, all are precious in God's sight.

Each week we close our service with the hymn, Bring Us Home. May we all find a place of genuine welcome with God our Creator and be at home in the wonderful community of Seattle First Baptist Church.