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Title: Wear Out Welcome

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Romans 12:9-21](#)

Text: [Matthew 10:40-42](#)

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I shared last week that my childhood home was in Tulsa. As a teenager, I grew up in Dallas. Our family attended one of the largest Christian churches in our denomination. It is a big barn of a place, built-in 1925, recognized for its outstanding architecture. Seating capacity was 1,500 with a large first floor and two balconies. As such,

during the summer vacation season, our church was filled with visitors, a destination for travelers coming to Dallas.

At the end of each summer service, our pastor stood on the nave floor in front of the massive communion table and pulpit and welcomed visitors by asking them to call out their home state. He would slowly move his hand across the sanctuary, bidding the visitors shout out and they would. "Oklahoma," and then he'd respond. "Welcome Oklahoma. Welcome." "Arkansas." "Welcome." "Missouri." "Welcome." Sometimes the welcoming ritual took 10 minutes, particularly when the youth group got involved. Sitting in the second balcony far away from our parents, we would have a little welcoming fun. We'd add to the list of states shouting out Alaska or Hawaii or Rhode Island to the mix. The senior pastor finally called us out one day when he said, "Alaska. You were sitting up there last week. Welcome, Alaska!"

We could do this today but not with the people in the sanctuary. There is just a hand full here and all are from Indiana. But each week online, we have people from many places. Most every Sunday, I could say, "Welcome, Florida! Welcome, Maryland! Welcome, Tennessee! Welcome, California! Welcome, Arizona!" There have even been a few weeks when I could say, "Welcome, Israel!"

Welcome. You see it at borders and the airport of countries around the world. Welcome to Canada. Welcome to France. Welcome to the United States. You see it as you drive to different states. Welcome to Illinois. Welcome to Indiana. You see it at city limits. Welcome to Indianapolis,

Fishers, Lawrence. Welcome signs are municipal welcome mats. They are all over the place. But of course, some of those signs and some of those places, the welcome is worn-out. With the coronavirus pandemic, borders are closed. You can't cross some borders freely.

There are some places where you aren't yet welcome to go, restrictions about gathering. Or if you do go, you aren't welcome if you aren't social distancing or wearing a mask. You certainly can't shake hands. For that matter, who wants to welcome someone who is wearing a mask which makes them look suspicious? Is welcome worn out, broken, no longer possible? I hope not, because Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:42)

It comes as the last thing Jesus says on his sermon on the mission. You didn't mishear me and I didn't misspeak. Most know there is a Sermon on the Mount. But a couple of chapters after it, there is also a sermon on the mission. It begins at the end of the ninth chapter when Jesus says "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38) Then, he gives instructions about their mission. "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (Matthew 10: 7a) Do it for free. Dress simply. Pack lightly. Depend on the hospitality of those who you meet. And finally, he says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:42)

At first, it doesn't sound that challenging. It reflects the practice of the Hebrews to welcome a stranger. Hospitality was a moral imperative. They remembered the years of exile and slavery in Egypt, and the years wandering in a wilderness. They knew what it was to be a stranger in a strange land. As a result, their laws require them to deal justly and compassionately with the strangers among them. "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:19) They lived out a very specific practice of hospitality, by welcoming others because it reflected their Hebrew tradition and faith.

When a traveler came to town, they waited by the well, and it was incumbent upon the townspeople to house and feed the visitor for the night. Of course, these travelers were rarely family. These were people unknown to the community. They were strangers, maybe aliens or foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, and even different ways of thinking and believing. Opening one's home was risky. Today, we'd describe such a thing as out and out foolish; even pre-COVID days we wouldn't be so welcoming. It's not that they didn't have the same

fear of a stranger as perhaps we do today. "Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems, is the human fear of the stranger."¹ But such hospitality was central to the Hebrew identity. The risk did not define the people; their hospitality did, for they knew such hospitality was central to the character of their God.²

What Jesus was saying was common practice. But he wasn't just reviewing what they had already learned in Sabbath school. He was expanding on it by making a big, bold theological statement. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me (Jesus), and whoever welcomes me (Jesus) welcomes the one who sent me (God)" (Matthew 10:42) This isn't just about the Hebrew mandate to welcome. This is bigger. When they are welcomed, Jesus is welcomed, and when you welcome Jesus, you welcome the one who sent him, you welcome God.

Do you hear what that means for you? When *you* are welcomed by someone, they welcome Jesus. I'm going to let that sit there for a moment and sink in. Hear it again. When *you* are welcomed, Jesus is welcomed. It means that it also cuts both ways. Jesus is not talking just about those who are sent but also those who he sends us. Do you get that? When you welcome someone, anyone, you are welcoming Jesus.

Jesus wants to make sure that his disciples understand this and he doesn't just say it here. At the end of his life, he offers a final parable, a story about sheep and goats, about the hungry, thirsty, naked, and imprisoned folk. In this story, he makes it clear when he says, "When I was a stranger you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35) When was the last time you saw a stranger? How did you respond? Did you think, "Here comes Jesus and I need to welcome him?"

"Hospitality not only welcomes others; it also recognizes their holiness. It sees within the person whom you greet a person dear to and made in the image of God," someone like Jesus. ³

Hospitality is a basic Christian practice. When we welcome others into our lives, it's an extension of loving your neighbor. By welcoming them we also welcome God in Christ Jesus, whom we are to love with our hearts, soul, mind, and strength. To welcome is at the heart of being Christian.

Which brings to bear the question of the day. How are you doing with this? How well are you welcoming? Before you quickly point out that social distancing makes impossible to welcome, and that it is worn out, I might point you back to the story about the well, where the ancient community welcomed strangers with different ways of thinking and believing, coming from different places, looking different than them, speaking in different

ways. They were people whose values and income and lifestyle were often very different. Biblical welcoming had more to do with accepting profound cultural and political differences than the physical act of hosting someone in a space and place. In that regard, one might need to ask how well you are welcoming people who think or act or believe differently than you?

If the past months are any indication, not too well. You may individually be hitting home runs but we corporately are not. All around us are signs of intolerance and division, a profound lack of respect for someone who doesn't think like us or act like us. We've closed our welcome borders and are infected with a virus that has worn out welcome. Our attitude about the other has been unmasked and it is hardly hospitable. What would Jesus say about our angry, polarized culture during this global pandemic? I think he'd say it is ripe with possibilities. "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

Our church, our community, our country, and the world needs to discover welcome again. We need to pray to the Lord to send laborers, representatives, people like you and me to welcome others because in every arena, every encounter, digital or physical, we need to offer them respect and grace that we would offer Jesus. It could work a miracle and transform our world.

To work that miracle and transform the world, you'd have to become receptive to the idea that fundamentally, every encounter, whether face to face, online, or in the news...every encounter requires hospitality and grace. It has to become your basic impulse to be open and welcoming.

Like the nun Kathleen Norris tells about in her book *Amazing Grace*. Even though she had Alzheimer's, she still asked to be rolled in her wheelchair every to the door of her nursing home so she could greet every guest. One nun said of her sister in ministry, "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to...but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life."⁴ Can you imagine such a welcoming spirit? It comes from a lifetime of openness, of the practice, and posture of receptivity that creates welcome.

Receptivity leads to acceptance, a practice of welcome that honors and respects everyone. Acceptance believes that everyone has an intrinsic value. Acceptance says, "I value who you are and what you say and do even if it isn't what I would say or do or believe." There is deep respect and acceptance because every encounter with another is an encounter with one created in God's image.

Receptivity and acceptance lead to the final act of welcome, generosity. Generosity transforms receptivity and acceptance into a complete expression of hospitality. It is the outward activity, giving away a part of yourself to offer welcome.⁵ Every exchange, every encounter is either open or closed, something is given or something is withheld, we are either generous or stingy. To welcome is to offer something of yourself and on most occasions today, that means grace. Because we are such an opinionated and polarized society right now, most welcome will require grace. A welcoming spirit ultimately is about giving of yourself as an act of acceptance and grace.

It doesn't have to be excessive. Jesus gives a simple example, "...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." (Matthew 10:42) That's not much but, to the thirsty, the generosity of the expression is graciously received. That's what Jesus was getting out. It's not the size of the welcome, it is the reward, the knowledge that you have offered welcome to someone, and when you did, they saw Jesus in you and in turn, you Jesus in them.

How are you doing with this challenge? Is your fundamental posture that of being receptive and open to others? Do you accept others as if you are receiving Jesus? Are you willing to give of yourself, to be generous, to offer grace? I hope so because Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:42)

You know, when it comes to this type of welcome, this is the type we need to wear out. I invite you to own that, claim that, to make it who are and wear out welcome.

¹ Ana Maria Pineda, *Hospitality in Practicing our Faith*, Dorothy Bass, editor, page 31.

² *The Art of Welcome*, Trace Haythorne, Day 1, June 29, 2008.

³ Pineda, p.38.

⁴ *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris, page 265.

⁵ Sawyer, Rev. Nanette ((Kindle Locations 1041-1043).