

“A Righteous Welcome”
Matthew 10: 40-42

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June 29, 2014

These last few weeks have been a real whirlwind for me. First I had the time of my life getting married out in Wyoming, and then I had another time of my life down in Delaware on the junior/senior youth mission trip. I have had more fun and more adventures in June than I usually have all year. It's been so exhilarating that all I want to do is tell you all about these two trips—the highs and lows, the details both big and boring. And, there will be plenty of time for that. Maybe even time today. But first, we have some important matters to attend to. We've got some scripture to reflect on.

I have been reading the Bible a lot this year—a few chapters most nights before I go to bed—and it has convinced me of two things: The first is that it is still incredibly relevant to our lives. Sometimes it takes reading a different version than the one we grew up with to connect or reconnect with the stories, but the stories still have power. They can still help us understand God and our relationship to God, and they still unite us with the prophets and peacemakers who struggled and searched and sought meaning for their lives in eerily similar ways to the way that we still do today.

The second thing reading the Bible this year has convinced me of is that it takes a lot of reading and rereading to learn the whole message of the Bible. When we read it piecemeal, or let others decide for us which verses we read, it is really easy to take away an understanding of the Biblical story that is much narrower than it is intended to be. Sure, it is it easy to skip over the confusing parts or the upsetting stories, but I've also realized that many of us, myself included, have also been skipping over other parts of the Bible that have the potential to add incredible depth and meaning to our lives. Today's scripture from Matthew is one of them.

It has never jumped out at me before, but Matthew 10, verse 40 is one of my new favorite verses in the Bible. Out of the almost 8,000 verses, it is definitely on my top 20 list. We are all familiar

with verses that talk about welcoming other people. Those are woven throughout Bible stories and Jesus' sermons, from start to finish in the Bible. Hospitality and welcoming strangers in is a common theme that we discuss on Sunday morning and ministry meetings and church school. But today's verse, Matthew 10:40, talks about welcome from a different perspective than we usually refer to. It says, "Whoever welcomes *you*, welcomes me." This verse is not just about welcoming others, but it is about each of us being the one who is welcomed in. And that can be a hard thing to do.

It often feels easier to me to be on the side of someone who is welcoming others in. Sure, there might be some preparation that needs to be done or I might need to work to remind myself how to be a warm host, but it is a role that I am comfortable in. Welcoming others is something we practice for our whole lives; from the time we are young children and taught to share our toys with our friends. There is a familiarity to welcoming in friends and neighbors and individuals you have just met—we invite the new kid at school to sit with us, we bring cookies to the family who moves in across the street, and we escort visitors to worship to coffee hour. We know how to do these things. We know it so well that it is often a core part of our identity.

But being welcomed in? We talk about that less. Being welcomed in has nothing to do with what we have to offer someone else—it is about being the one who needs something. Being welcomed by someone else requires us to leave the space where we are comfortable, to meet them in theirs. It requires a level of vulnerability—to open up to admit that we are looking for *something more*... Being welcomed by someone else means we are still seeking and searching and in need of something that we can't find within ourselves. Being the one who is welcomed is our reminder that we need our neighbors, we need our friends and family, we need people we have not even met yet to draw us in, to provide for us, to create a safe space for us.

On the mission trip last week, we talked about this concept. One night at vespers the theme was on the importance of stories—both listening to them and sharing our own. Everyone started by sharing the stories they had heard that week—stories of Wilmington's Habitat for Humanity chapter, of future

homeowners, fellow volunteers and construction managers. We sought out and soaked up these stories—they shaped our week and gave our work a deeper meaning. When the conversation shifted to what it is like to be the one sharing your story, there was more apprehension. We admitted that it is harder to open up to people than it is to listen to them. We talked about how sharing our stories—our fears and our past and the things that make us who we are—often feels like taking a risk. When you give away your story you are opening up to someone else—and they always have the potential to judge you or turn away from you. The work is in remembering that those same people also have the potential to care for you and nurture you.

When you share your story with someone, there is an opportunity for them to add to it, to join in your story and to walk part of your journey with you. When we meet people, we constantly decide whether the risk is worth it—whether we are going to let them in and get to know us or whether we will stay guarded.

That process of sharing our stories is my favorite part of mission trips. We spend all year talking to our youth about hospitality and widening our community to include other people. We practice being the welcoming ones, but when we finally get to the trip, the real work is when they start to open up and practice welcoming *each other*. You see it on the worksite—a quieter boy taking a chance by asking someone he has never spoken to a question. Someone else telling a story, or finding out they have something in common with a peer they thought was completely different than them, six girls banding together, turning to each other for friendship in a sea of junior boys. We work side by side, getting to know each other in deeper ways. This small risk of revealing our true selves to each other extends beyond the worksite.

The most powerful moment that we see it is during senior vespers. On the last night of the trip, the seniors create a vespers service for the rest of us. Every year they have different themes or different structures, but there is always a component when the seniors pose a question to the group. It might be a question about the future or about their hopes and dreams or about an experience they have learned

from. The put an invitation out and it is up to the rest of us to receive it. Every year the same thing happens—a few youth will respond, tentatively, feeling out how their answers will be received. They are honest but still a little guarded.... Then, someone will take a risk. They will answer the question with a full level of raw honesty that hasn't been done before. The rest of the group listens carefully and lovingly to this brave person, and then as the next person speaks, they begin to follow suit, opening up deeper than they would have before. When one person allows themselves to be welcomed—spiritually and emotionally—by the rest of us, it creates a space for others to do the same. We go deeper and practice nurturing each other, holding our stories, welcoming each other into the safe space where people can bring their full, honest, imperfect selves. It's beautiful. It's the culmination of the little ways they do this for each other all week long and it often ends up being emotional. It takes one person to take a risk, to put themselves out there and be vulnerable in order for this to happen.

The beautiful part of this verse in Matthew is the reminder that when we are welcomed in by others, they will see God in us. When we allow ourselves to open up, to step outside of our comfort zone, and to be received by someone new, we are given the strength to do so by someone much stronger than we are. We can do this work because God is in us and God is with us. When we take the risk of sharing our stories, people will see our honesty and vulnerability, but they will also see Jesus. They will be reminded of Jesus as a baby, crying in his mother's arms. They will see him as a grown man, alone in the desert, struggling with his life's meaning. They will recognize him on the cross, crying out in anguish to God. This verse reminds us that in welcoming us, they will welcome God. They will see their own story and their own struggles in yours—by one person allowing themselves to be welcomed, another will feel less lonely. A circle of compassion and care will begin to build. Other people will come, seeking that same welcome, and will receive that same loving embrace.

There are a lot of weeks when we are asked to welcome others, to bring them into our circle and our community. That is important, but it is only half of the work we are called to do as disciples. We can't ask other people to take risks or to open themselves up to new people and new experiences if we

are not also willing to do that work. This week, the challenge is to allow yourself to be welcomed into someone else's circle or community. Allow yourself to open up and share your story to someone new. To trust that it will be heard with kindness and treated with love; trust that your story is worth hearing. If you often find yourself as the host or the hostess, look for a moment this week when you can rely on someone else's hospitality. When you can sit down and know that you will be cared for. It is hard work, but it is made easier knowing that God is present with us in all times, and in all ways, and that no matter what risks you take, when you allow yourself to be welcomed in, God will be right there with you, lighting the way. Amen.