

“Living Hospitality” – Mat 10:40-42 – June 26, 2005

As you may have noticed, over the past few weeks we have been plodding at a somewhat measured pace through a fairly heavy part of Matthew’s Gospel, the second major section of Jesus’ teachings in this Gospel (the first major section of His teachings was the ‘Sermon on the Mount’). In these collections of teachings to His disciples we hear Jesus giving them a very complete and detailed outline not only what would be expected of them, but also what they would likely encounter as they struggled to fulfill those expectations. And it was not a pretty sight! Recall that after introducing their mission with stirring words about a call to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to the lost sheep of Israel, Jesus shifted to an image of innocent, trusting sheep being sent into the wolf pack. He provided them with explicit warnings of harsh persecution, even to death, coupled with acknowledgements that families and friendships would be torn apart as a consequence of their faith in Him, and because of their proclamation of good news.

I had just a little taste of that kind of reaction on Friday. You may have heard that I’m off to China for a couple of weeks in early August, accompanying a friend who is going to meet a woman with a view to marriage. On Friday I went to the Consulate of the People’s Republic of China on Broadway to apply for our visas. Now I knew that China is a bit ‘antsy’ about Christians visiting, but I wasn’t quite prepared for the reaction when the young woman taking the applications came to the part on the form where I had entered ‘Minister’ under ‘Occupation’. First she asked me if I had read the notice on the back of the form about “not engaging in any religious activities”, and I said, “yes, I had read the notice and it was not a problem”. She then informed me that because I am Christian clergy, I cannot apply more than a month before the travel date, I cannot get a multiple-entry visa, and I can get one for only a limited duration. In addition, I have to write a certification that I will not engage in any religious activities on the application. She was apologetic, and very pleasant, and assured me that when I reapply in July there shouldn’t be any problem, but we’ll see. I’m sure that my movements in China will be carefully observed and recorded. I guess I’d better not close my eyes in public, in case they think that I’m praying, and consider that a ‘religious activity’! Not a particularly welcome response, is it?!

Back to our reading, as concluding remarks to His teachings Jesus provides some closing words about welcome, more specifically about being welcomed. In what seems at first a curious shift in focus, these comments are no longer about the disciples, but about those who would receive them, and receive them well. In comments not only about but upon reflection to the church, Jesus offers encouragement to those who would treat his followers well, and receive them with even the most basic gestures of hospitality such as a cup of cold water. “None of them will lose their reward”, he promises, indicating that the reward is already theirs, and would be forever, a signal that the reward to which he refers is that of God’s grace, God’s reaching out first in love and reconciliation and acceptance.

Even with that shift in focus, though, these closing comments are still instructions to the early disciples, to the early church, and to us as well. They have been told about how they would be rejected and even abused and told how to respond, and now here are subtle instructions on how to respond when being accepted – and that is probably the harder of the two tasks. Most of us have developed enough scar tissue in life to be able to handle being rejected (I was very pleasant at the Consulate). Starting at a very early age we are hardened by older siblings who with the true cruelty that only children can exhibit not only point out how superior they are, but how inferior we are, and how they have neither need nor intention of surrendering the favourite toy we are weeping and wailing after in frustration. We progress to school, where our skills at handling rejection are both deepened and broadened in the classroom and in the playground. For true experience at rejection recall the High School dating scene!

It doesn’t get much better as we get older, because government agencies, work places, financial institutions all seem to have as a hidden agenda an overwhelming desire to not only define our place

but to hammer us firmly into it. Sad to say, even many churches are guilty of helping us to acquire emotional and spiritual scar tissue as they figuratively beat their chests, proclaiming proudly “we are not worthy”, and even more proudly, “you are even less so!” Oh yes, we are plenty hardened to handle rejection – what we can’t handle is being accepted.

It’s hard to accept that we are accepted, isn’t it? I suspect our most common reaction to someone being kind to us is to ask ourselves cynically, “what are they after?”, isn’t it? Constantly suspicious, ever alert to being “taken”, our defenses rise up like shields on the Starship Enterprise whenever we encounter alien kindness. We can handle the concept of ‘earned’ respect, but we recoil from spontaneous or unexpected love in action.

You would think this would be different in the church, but it seems to be all-too-common there as well. In particular, people have such a tough time grasping the idea of God’s grace, love and acceptance offered spontaneously. So often throughout the history of the church, and even today, people try to corrupt the beautiful magnificence of God’s grace by hobbling it with conditions, rules, hoops, thresholds, barriers and traps. Unable to truly accept that they are cherished and loved by God for no reason other than He chooses to do so, they certainly are not willing to accept that anyone else might be! The first barrier that is usually erected is the attempt to measure repentance, to quantify not only “how sorry are you, really?” but “how legitimate is your program of penitence?” Whether the confessionals be wooden stalls in a Cathedral, or virtual and invisible barriers within a congregation, the human obstacles to acceptance are too often tangible, and insurmountable. It is so hard to accept that we are acceptable to and accepted by God, and so we make it so difficult for others to understand that in God’s grace they are indeed accepted.

It is so hard to accept God’s grace, and yet it is so necessary. It is only when we can not only hear, but incorporate into our hearts, that we are truly acceptable and accepted that we can proclaim that same good news throughout our community, let alone the world. We need to hear the message, the scandalous message of the gospel, that God reaches out to us first, freely offering forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation, love. It’s there for the taking. Nothing more than to say, “thank you”, is required. There is no currency, no amount of gold or silver that we could possibly offer to purchase God’s love and acceptance. There is no plan of action, no list of sacrifices that we could possibly implement to earn God’s love and acceptance. We cannot possibly purify ourselves anywhere close enough to begin to be worthy of demanding God’s love and acceptance. Besides, it’s too late ... He has already offered that love and acceptance, time and again in his covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and people of faith through the prophets. God has offered that love and acceptance in the ultimate covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus, risen as the Christ. That love and acceptance is already there. All that is required of you is to accept it, and with good manners to say “thank you”. I know, I know, you’re going to tell me that’s too tough because it’s too easy. Yes, it is tough to accept that you are loved, but you are.

But that’s only half the story, isn’t it? Once we are able to accept the blessing of being warmly received as a proclaimer of God’s grace in Christ we surely must understand that blessing comes with the responsibility of living out the same response, of offering in turn that same hospitality to others – a very practical way to implement Jesus’ ultimate commandment of “loving one another as you have been loved.” With such a solid foundation of being loved it becomes easy to live hospitality, to reach out in kindness, to send out signals of acceptance, to foster trust that will not be violated. Once you realize you are truly accepted for who you are, you cannot but have this happy urge to help others find that same deep and abiding joy, to help them see through you that they too are not only acceptable but already accepted, to help them hear the good news of redemption through God’s grace in Christ Jesus, our Lord.