

Sermon – August 28th 2022 – Truly welcome

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I would like to invite you to recall and reflect on one occasion when you felt truly welcomed.

My own example: Bible College 1998 – Riverhead Presbyterian – single, aged about 30 – invited to the Guy Fawkes Night with families – meal in someone’s home (lovely when living in a hall of residence) – no idea what we ate – that wasn’t important. We were slightly on the margins, being new, and not fitting into an obvious demographic in the congregation but we were not overlooked – we were genuinely made to feel welcome – we weren’t in a position to invite people back.

When we wish to offer hospitality we can become focused on the details of food and drinks, presentation, or entertainment, and if we are unable to provide these things we may feel we have little to offer. But, as the story I have just shared, and I am sure the stories you have shared with one another have also revealed, the external details of the hospitality we give or receive are not as significant as the gifts of hospitality we all have the ability to offer to others:

- time
- acceptance
- a sense of belonging
- hope

Henri Nouwen describes *listening* as “a form of spiritual hospitality” which allows those who are listened to “to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their true selves”.

I have begun with those thoughts about welcome because both of the Bible readings we have heard today have a lot to say about this theme.

- In the gospel reading Jesus receives an invitation to dinner which he recognises is not an example of genuine hospitality but is, rather, an opportunity for people to “watch him closely”.

- In our reading from Hebrews, we learn about what “pleases God” as far as our relationships with others are concerned. I am focusing on the gospel reading rather than the reading from Hebrews but you will have noticed some obvious links between the two passages, I am sure.

In the reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus watches as the guests at the meal he is invited to jostle for position, and (as he so often does) he uses the behaviour he observes as a teaching point. He tells two stories about dinner parties, both of which are clearly critical of the party he is actually at, but are also intended to make points which have much broader and deeper significance.

In the first story, the guest has to remember that it is not his dinner party, and it’s not up to him to decide who should sit where. Those who push themselves forward and try to claim the best spots are putting themselves at risk of public humiliation. It is up to the host to choose who is honoured. That should make us sit up and think, shouldn’t it, when we make decisions, consciously or subconsciously, about who is “in” and who is “out” in a whole lot of contexts – but particularly when it comes to the kingdom of God.

In the second story Jesus tells, the question is what kind of reward the dinner party is to bring. It’s a story that I can remember talking and laughing about with my hospitable parents. Should we stop inviting friends for meals if we know that they are likely to invite us back? Is that what Jesus meant? Personally, I don’t think Jesus meant we shouldn’t welcome family and close friends into our homes – we know that he himself received great comfort from being in the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, for example. But Jesus’ words do challenge us to think about our motives for offering hospitality. If the point of it is that it will generate other invitations and enhance our status, then Jesus says we have got our priorities wrong.

As followers of Jesus we are to be attentive to those on the margins – those who have no power or influence - people who may often feel overlooked or unwanted. This call to be attentive to those Jesus noticed and treated with respect and honour is one that Christian individuals, churches, church organisations and movements over the centuries have tried to heed, and continue to try to live out. I am aware that

the Anglican diocese in Wellington, for example, includes these words as part of their three-pronged mission statement: “We prioritise the Biblical call to the last, the lost and the least.” Other denominations have similar mission statements, I know. These are values which are challenging for us to embrace and take a lifetime of practice for us to live out.

Towards the end of our gospel reading today, there’s a bit of a twist. Having told these two stories about parties, Jesus makes it clear that he isn’t *only* talking about ways that we extend welcome to others.

Let me draw on Jane Williams’ wisdom and way with words:

“With Jesus’ mention of ‘the resurrection of the righteous’ it becomes perfectly clear that these parties are God’s party, the kingdom. ... No amount of working your way up the religious hierarchical ladder is going to guarantee admission, and if you do get invited, you may find yourself in some very strange company, Jesus implies. But if, despite all that, you still want to be at the wedding feast, what are you supposed to do? ... How can we be sure of our invitation? The answer seems to be that so long as you are asking the question in that way, the response is going to be doubtful at best. How can I be sure that everybody gets an invitation, seems nearer the mark. And, underlying that, how can I live my life so that I would be genuinely pleased to see the local street person sitting at Jesus’ right hand at the banquet? How can I learn that including everybody does not devalue my own invitation?”

For Christians, at the heart of our desire to welcome others is the knowledge that we ourselves have been welcomed by God. You will see that in today’s bulletin we have included George Herbert’s poem, “Love bade me welcome” ... some may enjoy pondering that at home over a cup of tea, perhaps. It speaks of God’s welcome, extended to the poet, and his struggle to respond to God’s grace.

We are fellow-guests in God’s kingdom. Romans 15:7 says: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” How have we been welcomed? With grace and generosity and boundless love. This is the true welcome Jesus invites us to offer others.

Amen.