

"Welcoming God"  
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Ben Heimach-Snipes

Goodmorning! My name is Ben and I am the pastor of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. Welcome! Welcome visitors, welcome members and friends, welcome children! It is a blessing to be with you in God's house today!

Let us pray: Lord God, let the words of your servant's mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Genesis 22:1-14  
Matthew 10:40-42

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What is this all about, Jesus? Our Matthew text for today is a short quotation from Jesus about welcoming others. But how did we get here?

Chapter 10 of Matthew is a powerful and definitely nerve-racking teaching from Jesus for his 12 disciples. We have been reading through this particular set of instructions for the last three weeks.

First, Jesus summoned his disciples and gave them authority to heal all sorts of things.

Then, Jesus instructed his disciples to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and Proclaim the Good News: that "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

After that mind-blowing statement, he instructs his disciples to trust people in villages when they enter as strangers and stay with people who are hospitable to them to share the good news.

Just when the disciples might have been getting comfortable with this nerve-racking assignment to go out on their own to preach and perform miracles, Jesus warns of coming persecutions and the confusion and destruction that will come to normal social bonds of family because of their participation in Jesus' community.

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But don't worry too much, because Jesus' next move is to establish a new social contract for family: God as Father and the beloved community of God as our siblings.

My sister Katie just had a baby, and I don't think Jesus' new social contract would have been too reassuring to me if I were one of these disciples. “Sister against brother?” Luckily for me, my sister is a Presbyterian Pastor, so we should fit in the same family Jesus is fleshing out here. Right? Jesus, should I be worried here? Don't we have enough struggle just trying to love our family the way it is? And you tell your disciples that following you might cost them their families all together?

So, to finish off this challenging set of instructions for his disciples, we get to our text for today: Jesus assures the disciples that people who welcome them will receive the reward due to the righteous.

Jesus doesn't stop there, though! Besides disciples, there are prophets, righteous people, and even “little ones” who, when welcomed, will earn you a reward!

With this variety of people mentioned, I can relate to the lawyer in Luke who asked Jesus, “Now, who is my neighbor again? How do I get this reward?”

So what possibly could Jesus message mean for us today? We are not the disciples. We are not going to be able to host any disciples - at least I think - they are all dead by now, right?

Instead of trying to assign some moralistic instructional guidelines to this passage, we may be better able to discern God's call for us by seeking to understand the big picture of what Jesus is initiating in this pivotal moment of his ministry:

Jesus sends out his disciples to proclaim, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”

The kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus also calls “the Kingdom of God” - or as we discussed last week, “the Beloved Community” has come near!

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“How near?” you might ask. Well so near that you can touch it. So near you can be part of it. So near you can participate in it. The kingdom of God is with us now through the urging and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is access to grace that reaches beyond understanding - forgiveness for us that is unending. A constant renewal of our souls and reminder of our creation in God’s image. The kingdom of God is peace with justice. The kingdom of God is here, now, and yet incomplete.

So when we reread today’s text from Matthew, from the context of the kingdom of God, we can break it down to characters and actions of the kingdom.

The actions are acts of welcome and hospitality. The characters are members of God’s kingdom - our new family - the beloved community: disciples, prophets, the righteous, and little ones.

Jesus instructs his disciples while surrounded by little ones, children, new followers. Perhaps some sitting respectfully - hoping to impress Jesus by listening and asking good questions. Other children, too, exploring this new community time with Jesus - perhaps running in front of Jesus to tell a joke to a friend - interrupting Jesus’ instructions to the disciples with the roar of laughter.

“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.”

So why do we come to church today? Is it to give a glass of water to a child? Is it to welcome strangers into our homes? Is it to secure a reward from God in some transactional process of salvation in exchange for hospitality?

Our participation as church today is so much more than that. We are called to be part of the church because we have experienced God’s grace in some way in this space. ( Is that true for you? ) And in the Reformed tradition it is because of this grace that we are empowered to respond with acts of love, welcome and hospitality. When we know God’s love and experience

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God’s grace, we can be empowered to live out abundant acts of hospitality that seem ridiculous to our culture of individualism and security. We might even welcome some strange disciple into our home.

And what about this reward? The reward has already been given to us - grace. Grace has been given to us without merit.

Several years ago, I was an adult bible study leader for a high school youth group at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis where I grew up. I met every Wednesday with a group of high school sophomores to catch up on our lives, learn about new boyfriends, and eventually read the bible and reflect on it together.

One of the young women in this group had come every week since I started as a leader and had been a regular at the church her whole life. I’ll call her Laura.

During a discussion about a passage in Romans, we started talking about grace and forgiveness - God forgives us of our sins and we can always go to God to seek forgiveness and acceptance.

I was surprised to hear concern when we entered this topic. Grace was a good thing, right? From across the circle I heard this:

“I don’t think God can forgive me. I’ve done too much. I’m not a good person. God can forgive some sins, but not all sins right? Not my sins. I’m not good enough for God. I deserve what I get.”

I never did discover what it was that was unforgivable for Laura. I didn’t think I needed to know. Perhaps you can relate: Having done something that hurt someone so bad you could not imagine ever being forgiven.

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I was shocked. I had grown up in that same church and every step of the way I heard the message, "You are loved by God. God's grace is available to you. You are forgiven. You are enough." The message was present in my relationships with mentors, pastors and parents. The message was present in felt bible characters and sock puppets.

Laura had grown up in this same environment, and yet that message was not clear to her. She had concluded an alternative message that God loves good people and she had internalized that she was not included in the good people.

Not good enough for God. Not good enough for grace. Not good enough to be loved. Not good enough to be accepted for who she was. Not good enough to receive the blessings of God.

We receive messages of not being enough every day, especially as children: What do you want to be when you grow up? When you amount to something? When you stop acting like a child? Prove your worth - pass this test - reach this goal - have the right look - make the right friends - find the right job - TO BE ENOUGH. To be acceptable. To be good. To receive reward.

In our Hebrew Bible reading this morning, Abraham receives a message from God to sacrifice his child, Isaac, as a burnt offering for God. Without question, Abraham gets up early and begins his journey to kill his child. Perhaps hoping that killing his child would finally make him feel like enough for God: Making enough sacrifices. Having enough faith. Doing enough "good" deeds.

When God made plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued and pleaded with God to save the cities for the sake of even ten righteous people. But when God requested the life of Abraham's own son, he followed without question.

This is a dangerous text to read on its own. This is a story of a God who requires death and sacrifice to satisfy God's covenant relationship with Abraham. Why God? Why have you

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forsaken me? Do we not suffer enough from the sins we inherit and transgress against each other? Will we ever be enough to receive your blessing?

God answers in the conclusion of this chilling story. Just as Isaac begins to lose faith in his father’s love - as Abraham binds Isaac and prepares him to be the burnt offering - as tears fall from both of their faces, God returns in the form of an Angel and calls off this test of self sacrifice, this violent act of self destruction. A ram appears in the wilderness to act as the burnt offering for the Lord. And Abraham called that place “The Lord will Provide.”

The Lord will provide the bonds of relationship. The Lord will provide the means of Grace. The Lord will provide God’s own divine voice in Jesus to show us the kingdom of God. The Lord will provide.

The Lord provides, saying, “You are enough - just the way you are.”

So receive your reward: Receive God’s love. Receive a new identity in God’s grace because you are enough. You are worthy. You are part of God’s kingdom.

When we receive these gifts of God, we are forever transformed.

The kingdom of God is not powered by fear of divine judgment. The kingdom is powered by gratitude and joy. We can act to embody the values of God’s kingdom out of gratitude for God’s grace. We can discern the call of God - the call to participate in the beloved community - when we receive God’s gift to us spoken in the words of Jesus: You are worthy of love. You are worthy of God’s grace just the way you are.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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.”

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I was distraught when leaving bible study after hearing Laura share that she was not worthy of God's grace. I grieved that moment. I return to it often, hoping that her story has changed in the years since that most vulnerable discussion.

Laura's story, for me, was a calling. I heard God calling - through her words - to discern deeply what it means to welcome a stranger, to welcome a child, to welcome Jesus in the church. And out of gratitude for God's grace, I continue to seek that calling - to discern in community what it means to welcome beloved community in this place - knowing the Lord will provide.

Let us receive God's gift anew this day, and respond with gratitude.

You are enough.

Amen.