

## "Welcome"

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By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor

Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

## Matthew 10:40-42

Welcome. It's such a common word. So casual we walk over it on floor mats outside homes and banks and hotels. It greets us as we drive into a new state, a new town. People offer "welcome" as a greeting as we enter: "Welcome to Wal-Mart!" "Welcome to Moe's!" "Good evening and welcome – table for two?" "Welcome to the greatest show on earth." These common uses may hide the lovely depth and breadth of this word.

In English "welcome" finds its roots in a compounding of "well" and "come," with slightly different connotations than what we tend to use today. The root of "well" could go in two directions: it means something close to "wellness" or well-being," but it can be stronger than that, implying desire or pleasure. Some scholars see a link between "well" and "weal," the root of our word "wealth," and thus perhaps the word offers a kind of blessing. "Come" finds its roots in an English word that simply means the "one who arrives," or in Greek, "one who is received." Thus "welcome" in its earliest sense is an invitation *to come and be well*. Be received with the blessing of this new place.

While we use the word casually and commercially, making one welcome is not as simple as offering a greeting and moving on; it is rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality. It takes thought, intention, and discipline. Hospitality is an art; and those who practice it know what is needed – an appropriate beverage, food, a comfortable chair, a few thoughtful and respectful questions, a warmth that says, "make yourself at home."

For Jews and Christians, such hospitality has always been a part of who we are. The call to welcome the stranger is anchored in the Torah and counted as a measure of the Hebrew community's faithfulness to God. When a traveler came to town, they waited by the well for a cool drink, and it was incumbent upon the townspeople to house and feed the visitor for the night. Usually these folks were unknown travelers, aliens, foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, different gods. Didn't matter – by religious law they were to be welcomed. Opening your home was risky, no doubt. As Ana Maria Pineda reminds us, "Just as the human need for hospitality is a constant, so, it seems is the human fear of the stranger." (1) Nonetheless, such hospitality was central to Hebrew identity because it is central to the character of God.

The same was true in early Christian communities. Paul reminded the Romans to be hospitable to the alien; the Letter to the Hebrews said that in showing hospitality to strangers some people had entertained angels unaware. And in the Gospel of Matthew this morning, from the mouth of Jesus, we hear this word, "Welcome" spoken six times in two verses, followed by the simple example of offering a cold drink of water. Common stuff – holy manners – at the core of the disciplined practice of the early church. As theologian, Arthur Sutherland, has said, "Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls."

Now we are a large church that just got bigger, welcoming thirteen wonderful new members today, and some in this month's Inquirer's Class are out of town so there are more to come. We have a whole ministry of the session dedicated to evangelism which we call the Hospitality Ministry. We are generally very gracious – I like to think – in the ways we invite and welcome new people. I also think there is room – frankly – for more of us to be passionate about this central calling of the Christian church, and in our civic life given our public discourse on who is welcome and who is not.

Listen to this story about a small church just up the road in Charlotte, and how the Christian practice of welcome has become its source of new life. They call it: “the miracle on Fifth Street.” In 2006, Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church in downtown Charlotte, after watching its membership slide from more than 1,000 in the 1950s to fewer than 10 in worship most Sundays, the faithful few all in their 70s or older – decided it was time to close. But when Charles MacDonald, then the interim pastor, announced from the pulpit the session's decision to tell the presbytery they were closing the church, a startling thing happened. An inter-racial couple in their 30's came forward to ask if it was too late – because they had come to worship that Sunday intending to ask if they could join the church. And, they had been part of a group that had trickled away from other congregations, and had been meeting on their own as a Sunday evening Bible study. Some had joined other churches; others had wandered from church to church; some others were considering Caldwell. The next Sunday, more than 40 new people came to worship – joining the small group of what the pastor, John Cleghorn, now calls the “senior saints.”

Since then, Caldwell Memorial has become one of the fastest-growing churches in the presbytery, with a membership now of over 200. What's the attraction? It's more diverse than ever, with about a quarter of its members being people of color, and with a significant number of gays and lesbians and others who did not feel welcomed elsewhere. They call themselves “a diverse urban community of seekers,” and they have immersed themselves in meeting the community's needs – housing a bilingual preschool for low-income Latino families, opening on their property a 60-bed emergency shelter for homeless women, renting space to an Islamic school.

If you ask their pastor how all this happened, he says after long resistance, the church finally changed as the neighborhood did, they remained focused on mission, and people were welcoming. When the stranger knocked, they answered, even when that meant things weren't going to stay exactly the way they had always been. “You had this cadre of older members,” Cleghorn says, “who were not going to leave until they were literally forced out. They were just going to hold on that fiercely. That translated into their being the most open-minded and tolerant and clear-headed folks about what it would take to save the church. They did not let differences get in the way.”

Ann Alford had recently retired after a long career as a banking executive. She'd grown up in the church but left it 25 years earlier after a divorce and feeling like an outsider. On Easter Sunday, 2007, she read a front-page story in the *Charlotte Observer* about the revitalization of Caldwell church. Her first thought was “This sounds too good to be true,” but she put down the newspaper anyway, and drove to worship. Now an elder, she says: “People came up to me right from the get-go and said, ‘Welcome, we're glad you're here.’ ... “I was captivated by the spirit that was present here – the people and the

diversity.” (2)

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me. Receiving new members is not ultimately about growing the church, or adding to our number, or replacing the folks who die or move away, or even about being a friendly church with lots of programs for adults, children and youth. It is about recognizing that within the heart of God there is a holy invitation, extended to all of us, which says, “Come and be well.” Henri Nowen put it this way: “Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space; the paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free, free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances.” (3)

What enables us at Shandon to create that kind of space? We practice saying, “Come and be well.” We pass the peace of Christ in worship not reluctantly but joyfully – it is the oldest liturgical practice of welcome we know of – dating to the first century; we tell people our names and greet them without concern we’ll introduce ourselves to a long time member whom we feel we should already know – a challenge apparently in this large church I’ve heard so many times; we go out of our way to interact with today’s new members, to get to know them, and to help assimilate them; we claim “Welcome” as central to our mission – because safe and free places where all people are sincerely welcomed are increasingly rare.

This kind of Christian hospitality is rooted in a long tradition and given voice by Jesus himself, who – by his life, and by his Spirit in our midst even now – show us that – welcoming the stranger means: accepting differences, leaving divine judgment up to God, delighting in one another, a willing openness to spontaneity, generosity that leads with open hands instead of fists clinched around old ways of being and doing, offering something cool to drink.

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of a nun who, although she had Alzheimer’s, still asks to be rolled in her wheelchair to the door of her nursing home so she can greet every guest. Said one nun 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) If we ever forget what the mission of the church is supposed to be – may these gospel words be so engrained in us that we never forget this: in saying “Come and be well,” we welcome Christ himself.

Amen.

## NOTES

- 1) The opening ideas, and many words and phrases up to this point in this sermon, are borrowed from “The Art of Welcome,” by the Rev. Trace Haythorn, [day1.org](http://day1.org), 6/29/08.
- 2) Presbyterian-Outlook.org, story published in January 2011.
- 3) Martin Copenhaver, “Practicing Our Faith: Entertain Angels, 3/14/99.
- 4) Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 265.