

“Embracing God” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
July 2, 2017 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 10:40-42

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

I'd like for you to imagine a delightful moment you had when visiting a friend's or relative's home. Did you imagine a home where you felt welcomed and comfortable? If so, what person's home was this? Think about a certain time at that home that was special to you. Or were there - or are there - many such good times? What was it that made you so comfortable in that home? Isn't it nice to have such pleasant memories of good times.

Now, can you imagine a home where you felt not so welcome? What was a visit to that home like? What made you uncomfortable? Quite a contrast in your feelings about the comfortable and uncomfortable visits!

These few verses that I just read from Matthew conclude Jesus' instructions to the twelve disciples before they are sent out to continue and widen Jesus' ministry. You may remember Jesus gave them authority over unclean spirits and the power to cure the sick. He warned them that they would be persecuted. Jesus said, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves: so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” He told them not to fear the journey or those they would meet. Also, in this section of instructions to the disciples, Jesus explained that when the disciples proclaim the good news ‘that the kingdom of God is near,’ this news would cause division in families.

Today's scripture concludes Jesus' instructions to the disciples. Now, Jesus talks to the disciples about hospitality and about the reward for being hospitable: **“and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of the disciples - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward”**

Back to the question at the beginning about those pleasant memories of a time you felt comfortable and welcome. What was it that made you comfortable? What did you learn from that person? Have you taken those ‘things’ that made you feel welcome and added them to your hospitality in your home?

Entertaining your friends and relatives is one aspect of being hospitable. But what about the stranger, the people you don't know? Is your hospitality being extended to them? That's certainly the hospitality Jesus is talking about. Jesus wants us to take the love we share for friends and family and extend it to others – those we don't know. In that way, Jesus' love is spread in ever widening circles.

A person was visiting a Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. She was warmly greeted at the door by two lady ushers. These two ladies seemed very interested in the visitor just as you would expect. The two ushers asked her name and generally engaged the visitor in conversation. The visitor thought this quite delightful until she overheard these same ushers talking to another visitor and telling that visitor that this church was not the place for that individual to worship. It turned out that the ushers were screening the visitors. If the name the visitor gave to the ushers sounded to them like a protestant name, then the

visitor was welcomed. If the name the visitor gave sounded to them like a catholic name such as Maria or Catherine or Patrick, then the ushers told the visitor they were at the wrong church and sent the visitor on their way. (Feasting on the Word, Year A, v. 3, p. 188)

What a shocking story! We can't imagine that happening at our church. However, I think the story is worth considering when thinking about our own lives. It seems we all have subtle prejudices that prevent us from offering hospitality to those who may be different from us.

When we ask someone about education or profession are we filtering to see if we'd like to get to know this person better? If that person doesn't meet the standard we're comfortable with, do we politely close the door on developing a relationship?

When we lived in St. Louis, the question often asked when meeting someone for the first time was what high school did you attend. The answer to the school question was used as a filter to determine what part of town the person grew up in, pegging that person as acceptable or unacceptable in the social situation and determining if that person was worth knowing?

When you ask someone their marital status, what does that tell you? Would you rather not socialize with a single mother raising three kids? You'd have nothing in common, right? Is that the excuse when the single mother would welcome a friendship that provided adult conversation and perhaps some time away from the children?

In case you think I may be getting personal, you're right! I would like each of you to consider what may be preventing you from welcoming the stranger – that person you may not be comfortable having a relationship with.

Why am I so concerned? There's another verse in the Bible from Hebrews 13, verse 2 that says: **Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.** And Jesus explains later in Matthew, chapter 25: **'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'**

Jesus' words are very plain in today's scripture: **"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."** When you or I offer hospitality to prophets, the righteous or the little ones, as the scripture says – or to those you are uncomfortable around - we are offering hospitality to God.

When I began this sermon, I asked you to imagine a delightful moment you had when you were visiting a friend or relative. Remember that?

Now, I'd like for you to imagine helping a stranger. Now imagine embracing that stranger, putting your arms around that stranger to embrace him or her. According to Jesus who are you embracing? When you are helping a stranger, you are helping Christ. You are literally embracing Christ. Imagine that the next time you help a stranger.