

**Matthew 10:40-42**

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 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."

## **The Joy of Welcoming** - June 28, 2020

*Matthew 10:40-42*

I expect these days more than a few of us have been skirting the lines social distancing. Whether it's been getting together for Father's Day or Forth of July celebrations with family members or finally getting that long-awaited haircut in the barber shop or beauty salon where maybe not all the customers are wearing a mask, many of us are not following the CDC guidelines one hundred percent.

That's the problem with being human, I suppose. We need to be with each other, at least from time to time. My wife will tell you that I am a major league introvert. I can go long stretches of time without talking to anyone, speaking on the phone, or sending an email. Does that mean I hate people? I hope not, this pastor stuff is very much about working with and relating to other people. I feel sorry for any pastor who doesn't like interacting with her or his congregation.

Now for me, I don't necessarily have to be talking or joking around to get energized from being with people. Many times, I can be very content simply sitting and listening. Nonetheless, I have no desire to be a hermit and shut myself up in a cave in the middle of the desert.

This social distancing stuff is hard. No one really likes wearing masks and we are very happy when we get in our cars or get home to take them off. We wear them because we have to. We wear them to keep each other safe. I'm proud to say that New Jersey has done an exceptional job of trying to follow the guidelines. It's a big reason why our state's infection rates have gone down — and I pray, will stay down.

Nevertheless, people generally like being with other people, at least sometimes. None of us had heard of social distancing back in February. I remember when California started quarantining and shutting down entire cities. I thought, "Wow, that seems a bit extreme." Even in mid-March, when we shut things down around here, I still had my doubts. Of course, in hindsight, we probably should have shut down a few weeks sooner than we did, but a) we didn't and still don't understand Covid-19 very well and b) cutting each other off from each other seems quite unnatural.

No, it doesn't seem unnatural, it is unnatural. We are created to be together. The Genesis narrative reminds us that as soon as God created Adam, God said that it is not good that Adam should be alone. We need to be with others. We make families and families join together with other families: clans — tribes — nations.

A long time ago, a nation could be defined in terms of ethnicity. Thousands of years ago humans had managed to scatter themselves all over the earth and our bodies changed and adapted to the local

conditions. But over time we learned how to use animals for transportation, build faster and bigger ships, then trains, then cars, then airplanes. And all this led to more and more interactions, intermingling and our redefining what being a nation, or a tribe, or even a family was all about. No longer can we define our relationships in terms of our biology. My parents might have very similar DNA, or very different DNA, relatively speaking, really relatively speaking.

Did you know that that the DNA — the information inside our cells that determines everything about our bodies — 99.9% of our DNA is exactly the same for every human being. We differ amongst ourselves — at least biologically — only one tenth of one percent. By comparison, we have 99% of our DNA in common with chimpanzees. And even 50% of our DNA we share with bananas. One tenth of one percent. In money terms, a dime compared to one hundred dollars. Almost totally insignificant.

So then, why over the course our time on this earth have we put such an emphasis on our biological differences? Why should ethnicity matter? Why do we distinguish among ourselves in terms of our appearance? Yes, we can look “different” from each other, if you define different basically in terms of a few things like skin color, hair type, the ways our eyes, noses, or lips are shaped — essentially our facial features. Otherwise, our insides and outsides are the same. Is there any good reason to fuss about these trivial differences?

Yet we still do and have done for ages. I fear that many people in our world, maybe even ourselves, have a need to feel superior at least in some way to somebody. Perhaps it is in looks, or talent, or intelligence, or athletic ability — we humans seem to have a built-in need to establish some sort of hierarchy, some sort of pecking order that will insure that we don't find ourselves at the bottom of the heap. It seems that many, too many people, derive their sense of self-worth not from who they are on the inside, but who they are not on the outside.

You may have heard a few weeks ago about a newly minted college graduate named Kennedy Mitchum who asked the publishers of the Merriam-Webster dictionary to change their definition of racism. The dictionary's primary definition was "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." However, Kennedy pointed out that while partially correct, the definition did not go far enough. She thought the dictionary's second definition was more accurate: racism “divides human beings to express, first, explicit institutional bias against people because of their race, and, second, a broader implicit bias that can also result in an asymmetrical power structure.” In other words, throughout history human beings have become experts in creating institutions and power structures that lift some up and pull others down, solely on the basis of that one-tenth of one percent genetic difference among ourselves.

Some of us may say, “how ridiculous! So much debate, so much destruction, so much violence and destruction and death over nothing!”

Yet, obviously, it is not nothing. In our country alone, it would seem that a large number of people very much agree with racism in all its definitions. Moreover, it is equally clear that while many would claim that they are not racist according to the first dictionary definition, isn't it time to confess to ourselves that perhaps we are, and I include myself? The question is this: is it enough to claim that we are not racist if we do not recognize that many of us have benefitted or do benefit from the racism, either in the past or right now and act to do something about fixing it?

Let's face it: slave labor built much of this country. Our railroads were built in part by Chinese laborers who were paid next to nothing. Do you eat? I thought so. How much of our produce comes from the labor of immigrants brought into our country to pick our fruit and vegetables? It can be very tempting to look down on people who are less educated, or don't dress nicely, or speak with an accent. This cursed, somehow inborn need to look down on someone.

Not so long ago, it was normal for white people who could trace their ancestry to England to look down upon everyone who was different: Irish, Italians, Polish, and so many others. Then, whites began intermarrying so the hatred was directed at people who were a little more different, blacks, asians, Latinx people. Now there are at least some laws discouraging such racist attitudes — ineffective as they are — so attention has shifted to putting immigrants in general, LGBTQ people, and especially transgendered people at the bottom.

That is why, friends, the Christian response was and remains so radical. Jesus' answer to racism is found in one word: welcome.

Isn't being welcome that best feeling in the world? Isn't being welcome what we desire deep down in our hearts? From the noisiest extrovert to the quietest introvert, from an Inuit man living above the Arctic Circle to a San woman living in the Kalahari Desert, we all crave the feeling of being welcome somewhere. Of course, being welcome starts at home. Sadly, too many people in this world of all backgrounds do not feel welcome in their own homes. Welcome extends to our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our places of recreation and relaxation. And yes, for many, even most people, we do experience a certain level of feeling welcome in some aspect of our world. Perhaps it is not at home, but with a group of friends. Perhaps it is the workplace, or a team, or even that place like the fictitious bar called Cheers, “Where everybody knows your name and you're always glad you came.”

Feeling welcome somewhere in this world is a good thing. As Christians, there is one thing even better than feeling welcome: extending welcome. Being together as God made us to be means that

relationships are everything in this life. There is no way that we can simply go it alone, although there are times when we try.

But the whole point of us being in relationship with each other is that relationships work in not just one but in two ways. Human life is all about interacting together. It is not enough, however, just to hang out at a place where we feel welcome, comfortable, accepted, even loved. No, Jesus asks us not to merely be recipients of welcome but also to actively extend welcome — extend welcome to others.

Using the hierarchy of his day, Jesus made reference to the prophets, the righteous, and the little ones — those at the top, the middle, and the bottom — as people understood things back then. But he begins by saying flat out, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” In other words, we cannot confine our acts of welcome merely to those who look like us, or are on the same economic level as us, or have the same education level as us, or work where we work, or a citizens of the same country. No, the act of welcoming is not just about opening and accepting a fellow human being, welcoming is literally about opening ourselves to others and accepting that God loves us all equally.

When we commit the act of welcoming — regardless of whom we are welcoming — we are acting in the place of Jesus Christ. God made us all and God made us all equal. Therefore because we are acting as Christ when we welcome people — anyone — we must work to make everyone feel welcome: prophets, righteous, and little ones alike. There can be no distinction at all.

On what basis can we welcome one person and deny welcome to another? Not on race, not on gender, not on nationality, not on education, not on health, not on sexual orientation, not on age, not on appearance, not on language, or clothing, or what they eat. Jesus welcomes all and as the followers of Jesus, we are invited to the joy of welcoming all into our hearts and into our lives.

Now there is a cost to welcoming all equally. Jesus welcomed all and interacted with everyone he met regardless of their background. Sometimes we forget how truly radical and different Jesus’ ministry was and is from what was going on at the time. We take it for granted because our conversations about racism, as incomplete as they are, are fundamentally rooted in the how Jesus extended his own welcome and acceptance to everyone he encountered.

Will others judge us on whom we choose to welcome? Some may say we do not welcome enough. Others will say we welcome too much. We will face criticism whatever we do. But Jesus, as always, has the last word, “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.”

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.