



I've been asked many times to "smile for the camera," but never asked *to preach* to a camera! It's not the best, is it? For one, a preacher can't even tell a joke, unless there is a laugh track!

But, as a Lutheran preacher, it does remind me of a line that was going around the ecumenical community when I was in seminary—when stereotypes were jokes. Lutherans, we were told, are "saved by faith." Roman Catholics are "saved by good works." And Episcopalians are saved . . . "by *good taste*."

In actuality, it is tempting to ask, when was the last time that you met an Episcopalian who was concerned about whether he or she *was saved*?

In today's Gospel, we have sayings of Jesus that settles *the anxiety* that many Christians of *other faith traditions* may have, about being saved. The grace and love of God aren't conditioned on some kind of "gotcha" test. Jesus is telling us that, in contrast to how fear-mongers or rule-makers may *think* God treats the world, we should be open to grace—to receiving God's grace the way we would greet someone at the door. Jesus tells his disciples, Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and in turn, the one who sent me. The disciples then, are in the role of emissary, of ambassador, or representative, of *God*.

The writer of the Hebrews reminds us to practice hospitality to *strangers*, because people have "entertained angels unaware," that is, unaware it was angels they were welcoming. And Luke's Gospel tells the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus when a stranger walked along with them who, it turns out, was the risen Lord Jesus.

In our lives, our salvation is *already nailed*. And if offering a cup of cold water to a disciple means we will not lose our heavenly reward, then don't you think offering hot coffee in the social hall should cover it, too?

Seriously, this text is not meant to be so trivial we can skip it without thought. What does "welcome" really imply? What does it demand of us?

Today we are a community, but unlike the Gospel story's disciples, we're not so good at going out. Our welcome is something we try to make real when people come *in*.

Let me try to unfold this a little more.

Where Jesus says, "Whoever gives to one of these **little ones** even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward." The Greek word used for little ones, *mikros*, often refers to children. Think, like, children in a Sunday School. But *it also* refers to those who are new to faith, new to the spiritual life. *Seekers*, if you will, who are *seeking to know* if the community of Jesus is a place they might grow and mature spiritually. And *mikros* in the New Testament is a word that also includes those who are *most vulnerable*, as children, and strangers, minorities, foreigners and homeless people *frequently are*: Vulnerable. So Jesus challenges our own *lived faith—our doctrines and our beliefs as they are put into practice in the real world*.

Some years back I heard a story about a conservative Lutheran congregation in the Midwest. It ran a weekly ad in the local paper saying "Everybody is Welcome." That's pretty typical of churches.

Then *trouble* happened. A member of their congregation said to the pastor and leaders, “My brother is *gay*. Is *he* welcome?” . . . They pounced on the man and told him that the Word of God condemns homosexuals. Yada yada ya. “But you say ‘**everybody** is welcome’ here. How can you say *that* and close your doors to *my brother*?” . . . Things got embarrassing, and uncomfortable. The upshot was that the man and his wife were pushed out of the congregation *for being trouble-makers*. *AND*, the church *revised* its newspaper advertisement: It took *out* the words that said “Everybody welcome.”

In 2008, when I was serving Hollywood Lutheran Church, we welcomed a couple of homeless guys that showed up one night for an A.A. meeting in the basement. That wasn’t new. We had welcomed others who were homeless, not just welcomed to coffee hour or to worship services. I allowed two of them—a man and a woman who had cohabited in makeshift sidewalk shelters *on our block* in Hollywood for nearly 17 years—to live one entire rainy season inside our church Narthex.

But these two guys in the A.A. meeting were a different case. One of them was a parolee, just out of state prison. They came to worship services, then joined the congregation, and in fact one of them eventually was elected to the Church Council. The other one was sent back to prison for a parole violation. He had failed to give the parole officer his address, because he was *homeless*—duh!—but failure to report was an imprisonable offense for a parolee.

I was in the courtroom the day the Judge sent Jeffrey back to prison; I sat with his attorney and his parents when the Judge pronounced her sentence. Jeffrey wrote to us from prison, and we wrote back. Within a few months, he told his story to other inmates. Another inmate wrote to us that Jeffrey became acquainted with. *He* was ecstatic to know there was a church in Hollywood that would welcome *him*. “How do I become a member of your church?” he asked in his letter.

Privately, I was both amused and disoriented. Our church Bylaws said that, to be a member of the church, you had to—as a minimum—receive communion once a year, and make a contribution of record. In other words, you’re welcome *if you’re here*, and if you *put up money*. But this inmate in *prison* couldn’t do *either* of those things. I wrote back to say how much I supported his *faith* and *interest* in our church. But *membership*?

It took me awhile, but it dawned on me that St. Paul *was imprisoned*. Paul was framed, actually, accused of inciting a riot and imprisoned *twice*. And from inside prison, Paul wrote letters. He supported and encouraged and exhorted the faithful in the Christian communities to which he wrote epistles. He acted as a Bishop does today. Who was *I* to say that Anthony, or Jeffrey, could *not* become members of our congregation?

With our Prison Ministry Committee’s support, our congregation changed the Bylaws to provide for Associate Membership for inmates—who professed the same faith that we profess, who read the same Bible we read, and who pledged themselves to pray for us as we prayed for them.

Matthew’s Gospel is a challenge. It challenged the community of Jesus in his own time and, by extension, our community in our time. Where does radical welcome lead us today? Very few of us would welcome a homeless person into our own private homes, but we compassionately support outreach programs that get homeless people into shelters, and feed them, and line them up with community services.

Right now, we’re in a COVID-19 bind. We can’t welcome *anybody* “in,” at least not yet.

Even our Thrift Store, which has *always* been a “welcome place,” is closed. This pandemic prompts us to ask ourselves what “Welcome” means *now*, and what “welcome” should mean *next*. It prompts us to listen for God’s answers to our questions.

What does it mean to really open my / your / our arms? Without meaning to scold in any way, one thing we could be doing as individuals *and* as a community, is to ask: what are the barriers we inadvertently put up, or allow others to put up? As a pastor, I fretted about the ADA—Americans with Disabilities Act. Are the doorways wide enough to accommodate someone with a walker or wheel chair? Do we have 1 in 12 ramps? And I fretted over our sound system (which was poor). How many hearing-impaired people didn’t hear our welcome? And incidentally, are you aware that 95% of Americans who are deaf are *also unchurched*, because congregations and denominations of *hearing* Christians have not *put themselves out* to welcome deaf people. I know it’s not easy. It takes an investment, attention, and commitment, to be effective.

By any measure, radical welcome demands investment and attention and commitment. I know that *this*, and *many* Episcopal and Lutheran churches, and certainly many others, have fretted over the color barrier. Why are there so few Black people who come to Episcopal or Lutheran Churches? Is it because we are too English or too Scandinavian? Or because our church music has little or no Gospel spirit? I read the other day that the Episcopal Church today is *whiter* than the United States was in 1790.<sup>1</sup> Why is that?

More than “stuffy” English hymns or Gospel music, *is it* because—as individuals—we don’t even *know*, we seldom *interact with*, or become *friends with*, people of color?

Well, not to fuss, you think. There are very few Black people who live in San Luis Obispo County. Really?

Or is it because we, as people of enormous privilege, have allowed our bureaucrats and our elected officials, to maintain policies which protect and encourage *privilege*—in housing, employment, education, public services, access, and opportunity? Have we made our own lives on the Central Coast *so comfortable and secure* that it’s virtually impossible for people without privilege to come here seeking a better life? But since there are so few around here, we don’t see the need to welcome the poor, the vulnerable, the stranger, or the minority.

Our nation, too—the America that we used to describe as a “Christian nation”—is struggling as it morphed into an America that no longer welcomes. Its present immigration policies not only have allowed the government to separate children from their parents because families presented themselves at our border to seek asylum, but we have, at least for the present, turned our backs on our heritage and our national “doctrine” expressed in Emma Lazarus’ famous 1883 poem, *The New Colossus*. Especially this week as we celebrate the nation’s birthday, every word is still compelling and important:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Our federal government just released new rules for getting visas to work in the United States. If I understand the news correctly, America no longer allows people to come because employers need their skills. It no longer allows people who are professionals like nurses and doctors to come in. But it gives priority to those who earn the most money, or bring money. Is America the Mother of Exiles or has it become Patron of the Privileged? Our national dialog, the so-called “culture wars” since the 1960s has revolved around who will be included, and who excluded—in other words, welcome. Or not.

Our national history is deeper and darker. For over 300 years America *imported* Black Africans, probably over 600,000 slaves. It did not *welcome* them, it *exploited* them.

This Fourth of July will be more challenging to people of conscience and principle than any other in living memory. There are lots of controversial social issues swirling and exploding in our nation this year. Americans are deeply divided over racism, racial privilege, nationalism, respect for law and the pursuit of justice. Those are political—and policy—issues, and I don’t pretend to have the answers to those complex questions.

But, if we are disciples of Jesus, in a post-Christian nation, we need to ask ourselves and our church communities: what does the welcome of Christ mean *right now*? How do we discern it? How do we live it out? And as we are participants in the larger society, we are entitled, and expected, by society to be part of the national dialog. In the public arena we should ask, what does it mean to “lift our lamp beside the golden door,” to welcome those “yearning to breathe free?”

So, even if our salvation is assured because we have done something as simple as offering a cup of cold water to the little ones (or hot coffee to the grown-ups), even if you don’t worry about “being saved,” we have this Christian opportunity to practice radical welcome, to uphold those who are vulnerable, to take in strangers, and to speak and act on behalf of public policy so we *live out* hospitality to others *as if* we are welcoming *Christ himself*. Amen?



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## Notes

1. *Sojourners*, July 2020.