

“People of Christ’s Welcome”

Today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading comes at the conclusion of Jesus’ instructions to his original disciples with reference to their first missionary journey. Throughout these instructions, Jesus warns the disciples about the possible negative responses they should expect and part of what he tells them is to comfort and encourage them. However, another important aspect of his guidance was explaining to them why they would discover such hostility. **Jesus’ explanation boils down to the revolutionary nature of his Good News!** For many hearers, the message of Jesus would challenge their whole way of looking at the world! The change Jesus came to announce meant a totally new alignment of society, so those in power, authority, and wealth and those, who were frequently dominated by them, were sure to be extremely unhappy. Conflict was going to be a natural part of the results. As we examine what Jesus said in the Reading, let’s especially look for Jesus’ words of comfort and encouragement and for hints about how he was challenging the status quo or the ways of the world.

Today’s Scripture begins with Jesus saying to his disciples, *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One Who sent me.”* **Welcoming – Hospitality** was central to the everyday lives of the people living in the countryside, towns, and villages along traveling routes in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. However, the rich, powerful, and those with authority would most likely not live where travelers often requested assistance during their journeys.

Additionally, the religious authorities of the Jews, who most likely did very little hosting of strangers, focused on legalism – fulfilling the Law, which they believed God had given to Moses. **They liked to emphasize being ritually clean** – a state of being, which was obtained by not touching or relating with something or someone spiritually unclean. Therefore, the actual practice of many in the Jewish culture was to be very concerned for one’s own ritual cleanness by avoiding or rejecting or ostracizing the perceived **“unclean”** or **“sinners”**.

So, there were many people living in that region, who were **Not Welcomed – some even Untouchable!** The Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, the priests, and the religious leaders – the High Priest and the Sanhedrin constantly declared the list of the type of persons whose very contact would be detrimental to one’s relationship with God. Some of those folks on the list were the physically or psychologically ill, foreigners, Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, slaves, beggars, the poor, women [especially those who were experiencing their periods], the unfruitful with reference to the producing of offspring, and the dead.

The gospels are filled with examples of Jesus touching, healing, eating with, and welcoming all of those “unclean” people – the “sinners”! He was frequently criticized by the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, along with the other members of the religious establishment because he was associating with such reprehensible creatures. **Jesus even taught others to treat all people with respect and self-giving and sacrificial love!** He was truly going against the culture – the self-centered and selfish ways of the world. So, when Jesus gave his disciples their instructions for their first missionary journey, he continued his revolutionary message and activities saying, *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One Who sent me.”* Jesus was not just comforting his disciples with his brief comment about welcoming, **he was drawing the line between his call for a New Relationship with God and one another and the selfish legalism demanded by the religious authorities.**

The Chancel Voices’ Anthem, “Whoever Welcomes You Welcomes Me”, provides us valuable insight into the New Reality Jesus came to proclaim and establish. **The anthem sings about the subject of welcoming but from the angle of how we welcome Jesus!** The composer linked today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading with **Matthew 25:31-46**, which is **Jesus’ parable about the Final Judgment.** **The point Jesus made in the parable is we are relating to – welcoming “the Son of Man” – the Messiah or Christ as we love – interact or reject others who are in need.** The anthem gets at this by including a series of questions – **“Where will we find you? What will you look like? When will you get here? Who will you visit? Who will you see?”**

The anthem asserts the first verse of the Reading, *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One Who sent me”* is, in part, **Jesus’ call for his disciples** – that includes you and

me to be Jesus Christ – welcoming and loving everyone – especially the mistreated and rejected!

Unfortunately, everyone who has been on the list of the “unclean” or the “untouchables” has frequently experienced rejection and abuse by society and even from many, who call themselves Christians or followers of Jesus Christ.

Fortunately, a good number of persons, either intuitively or intentionally and knowingly, **treat others as they would Jesus and/or relate to others more like Jesus would.** As an example, Gene Blair shares, “For several weeks, Mrs. Sherman’s first-grade class had waited for the field trip to the observatory. Notices had been sent home with instructions about the bus, lunch, and times of departure and return. To the students, waiting for the field trip was like waiting for Christmas.”

Blair continues with the story, “Finally, the day arrived. We grabbed our lunches and coats and lined up for the bus. In the back of the room, one boy began to cry because he had forgotten to bring a lunch and would have to stay behind with another teacher. In a few minutes, the other children had contributed extra sandwiches, fruit, desserts, and drinks until the boy had a feast for his lunch. With new tears, this time tears of gratitude, he grabbed his coat, lined up, and climbed onto the bus.” Blair concludes, “We had given him a ‘cup of cold water.’” **“Acts of service are not always dramatic or earth-shattering. Simple caring is all that is needed. Discipleship means being alert for opportunities to care, to demonstrate God’s loving-kindness, and to teach others to do the same.” Can you and I can give priority to following the opportunities to be welcoming and loving in our daily lives?**

The remaining portion of today’s Scripture provides comfort, hope, and encouragement. Jesus said, *“Whoever welcomes God’s messenger because he is God’s messenger, will share in his reward. And whoever welcomes a good man because he is good, will share in his reward. You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward.”* Yes, even those, who are not motivated to be Christ toward others because of their Faith – Relationship with the Son of God, will often receive the Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love of God shown through Jesus with hospitality – in a welcoming way because they know such responses are rewarded.

Unfortunately, a multitude of persons have received treatment from professing Christians, which is more in line with the terrible way the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law treated those they defined as the “unclean”, the outcasts, and the untouchable “sinners” of their day. However, you and I and all Christians are called to be **People of Christ’s Welcome!** One of the recurring comments I have heard from Guests among us in the Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ faith community is that they truly feel **Welcomed and Loved.** Especially folks, who have experienced rejection by a local congregation because of Pharisaic type of judging, have expressed **relief and joy** because of our reception and loving of them.

Yet, there is one aspect of our **Welcoming – Being Christ toward others,** which many, if not all of us, can do far better with. We can make better use of the opportunities God provides us in our daily lives to show **Welcome – Christ’s love** to those, who have previously been rejected by society and/or local churches. We can reach out personally with welcome and love but, also, we can **tell them about the Welcome they will receive** from the community of Round Grove United Church, **if they accept our invitation to come be our Guests.** Let’s work on responding to hurting individuals with the **Good News about Jesus Christ’s Love and Welcome being available to them through Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, as well as, by doing more welcoming and loving of the hurting in our daily lives.** Let’s be **People of Christ’s Welcome!** Amen.