

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 28, 2020
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Jeremiah 28:5-9 (*see also 27:1–28:4 and 28:10-11a*)
Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

***Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,
and whoever welcome me welcomes the one who sent me.***

In the midst of a pandemic, words of “welcome” sound ... *different*.

You have welcomed me into your very homes these past few months, but I have not returned the favor: the doors here at Trinity are locked; you are not welcome here. And yet I do extend a (virtual) welcome. As I have repeated many times these past few months, “We may not gather AT the church, but still we gather AS the church.”

And my welcome has reached more people these past months – if the measure that welcome is the number of hits on Facebook or YouTube on a Sunday morning. We have welcomed more – and a more varied congregation:

- I’ve heard from former members of Trinity who have found us online and been pleased to come home again. (Though, for some, this sanctuary is not the one they remember.)
- And we’ve welcomed friends and family and strangers from foreign lands to our slice of heaven here in central Oregon.
- I’ve heard from members of churches I’ve served in the past, joining me in worship again for the first time in more than five or fifteen or twenty-five years.
- And we’ve welcomed other Episcopalians – members of this “branch of the Jesus Movement” – from other corners of our wider fellowship, even the President of the House of Deputies! (She lives back East and says she enjoys the time zone shift.)

In this morning’s gospel, Jesus tells us there is something sacred in every encounter we share ... even, we dare imagine, in this moment now.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me all that is sacred: WELCOME!

But there’s something particular in the words that follow. Jesus’ words are poetic, his threefold repetition:

***Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet ...
... a righteous person in the name of a righteous person ...
... one of these little ones in the name of a disciple ...***

It's poetic, but what does it mean to speak of welcome in terms of "in the name of" someone?

I've learned that it's an idiomatic phrase. To speak of welcoming someone "*in the name of*" something means welcoming that person because of who they are. So here Jesus describes welcoming a prophet precisely for being a prophet, welcoming a righteous person precisely because they are righteous, extending a cup of water to someone we might overlook precisely because they are, like us, following Jesus.

And that asks a bit more of us than merely to be nice to others. There's nothing wrong with being nice – and there are times even being nice seems in short supply – but it's a bigger ask.

Let's begin where Jesus begins: welcoming a prophet precisely for being a prophet.

Now in general, prophets are not the easiest folks to have around. They're not fortune-tellers, I remind you, they're truth-tellers, pronouncing inconvenient truths.

Take a moment to consider the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was rarely popular in his lifetime because he rarely said what people – especially those in charge – wanted to hear. At one point in his life, when Jeremiah had been banned from public speaking, he dictated his words to his secretary Baruch. Baruch took the scroll, with the words of Jeremiah to Jerusalem and he read those words in public.

Royal officials decided the king needed to hear them for himself. So they took the scroll from Baruch (telling him he'd better make himself scarce for a while), and one of the officials read the words aloud for the king to hear. And as the words of the prophet were being read, the king took out a penknife and cut into the scroll, cutting out a few columns at a time and casually tossing the words into a fire. He did not care what the prophet had to say. ⁱ

That tension lies behind the words in our reading from Jeremiah this morning.

If we hear those words without knowing the bigger story, they probably sound like Jeremiah shares the hope of those who impatiently wait for peace and prosperity in the land. "Amen! May the LORD do so ..." he begins.

But that's not at all what's going on. (Not by a long shot.)

Jeremiah's words are dripping with sarcasm. He has just put on a yoke. He says it's a sign of what's to come: Babylon will lay a heavy yoke on God's people; the people will be treated like oxen; and they will carry this burden for the next seventy years ... so they'd better get used to it.

But Hananiah, having listened to Jeremiah's doom and gloom for years by this point, has had enough. He takes Jeremiah to task. He rejects Jeremiah's harsh words and replaces them with false hopes. He proclaims what he (and undoubtedly the nation) longed to hear.

Instead of Jeremiah's dismal depiction of crushing defeat and a lengthy exile, Hananiah paints an idyllic picture: Babylon, he says, will be the loser; and any exile – any disruption to daily routines – merely a temporary inconvenience; the treasures of the temple will be restored; and God's people will soon be allowed to return home and their familiar lives.

"All will be well again!" he says. "And soon!" (And, boy, doesn't that sound familiar.)

That's the disagreement that comes to a head before our reading this morning.

And then, in the verses that immediately follow, Hananiah makes the point emphatically. He takes the yoke from Jeremiah and breaks it. And then Hananiah proclaims to the people:

'Thus says the Lord: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.'

Jeremiah 28:11a

But wishing doesn't make it so. And it didn't prevent the 70 year-long Babylonian exile.

That's the wider context of the brief passage we hear this morning. And that tells us how to hear these words. Jeremiah doesn't share Hananiah's false hope. It would be wonderful for God to do what Hananiah has described, Jeremiah says, BUT (and it's a big but) it's all delusional.

Down through the ages, prophetic words, unwelcome though they may be, are the truth and reality people need to hear. False prophets line up – now as in days of old – to tell any who will listen, especially those in charge, what they want to hear. But true prophets speak these hard, inconvenient truths.

So, THIS is what Jesus says: "Whoever welcomes a prophet precisely for telling you not what you want to hear, but what you need to hear ... whoever welcomes that truth will be better off."

And there's something similar going on in the next bit, I think, when Jesus goes on to speak of welcoming a righteous person precisely because they are righteous.

Marcus Borg once noted that the words "righteousness" and "righteous" show up a lot in the Bible. In the Bible, these are positive words.

But today, if we describe someone as "righteous" modern people think: holier-than-thou; judgmental; condemnatory; hypocritical; priggish; legalistic; moralistic; full of themselves; pompous; arrogant.

But modern associations are not biblical connotations. In the Bible, righteousness and righteous are positive words, associated with “doing what is right.” Righteousness is nearly synonymous with justice – not criminal justice (as we think of it), but distributive justice: the fair distribution of the material possessions of life for one and for all. To say that God is righteous is to say that God does what is right, always seeking the welfare of all God’s children. ⁱⁱ

And more to the point for us this morning, righteous people are people who do what is right. They are those who declare, “We want justice in this world. We want all God’s children to have enough – enough safety, enough protection, enough opportunity, enough hope for their future (and their children’s future), enough to get by another day.”

This is what Jesus says: “Whoever welcomes a righteous person precisely for insisting that we need to make this messed-up world live up to God’s dream – for the world and for all God’s children ... whoever welcomes what sets the world aright will see a better world.”

And that third case, when Jesus speaks of welcoming others – “one of these little ones” as he calls them – he’s challenging us with something more than being nice to children. He’s hoping, I think, that we’ll look not merely for prophets to speak truth to power and for righteous folk to make all things right again. He’s hoping we’ll look to one another – “the little ones” who keep the faith day by day – to do the little things that show us to be followers of Jesus, people who love God and neighbor as ourselves.

And it’s helpful here, I think, that Jesus scales it all down, that Jesus speaks of a simple tangible act: giving a cup of cold water to another. Jesus speaks of things any of us “little ones” can do.

And I recall words that come later in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus speaks then of God’s judgment, and of those surprised to be inheritors of God’s goodwill, blessed by God for their care of the Holy One in this life. And they ask, “When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or alone or sick or in prison?” And the answer, of course, “Just as you did it – fed, quenched, clothed, nursed, visited ... Just as you did it to one of the ‘least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25)

Simple acts of kindness will not usher in the kingdom. They will not instantaneously fix everything that is wrong with the world. But they are holy acts all the same. The calling we share with one another is simply to follow in the way of Jesus, where even a small kindness shown to another person makes a difference: love God; love your neighbor; love yourself.

This is what Jesus is saying: “Whoever sees another child of God as deserving of a bit of human kindness is taking part in the holy work of making this world a better place.”

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me ...

In the midst of today's twin pandemics – the viral pandemic as well as the social one ... In the midst of these twin pandemics, there is something more at stake here than genteel hospitality, something for us to do beyond affirming (in our polite and civil tones) that “we welcome everybody here.” This morning, we are called to heed the inconvenient truths we need to hear, to support those who work to heal all that is wrong with this messed-up world, and to embrace the tasks that our ours to perform.

I'm reminded of words attributed to Mother Teresa:

Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.

And remember that even small things done with great love help make this world a better place:

- Wear a mask not to protect yourself, but for the sake of others, the “little ones” who are vulnerable. Wearing a mask is not living in fear; it's living in love.

“When did we see you at risk for COVID-19?” And God will answer, “As you masked for the ‘least of these’ you did it for me.”

- Maybe racism, that social pandemic, feels like something too big for any of us to tackle. But there are spaces where we can address that larger issue.

“When did we see you scared or at risk?” And God will answer, “As you donated to support anti-racism, when you spoke up for the ‘least of these,’ you did it for me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Do one thing to show love of God and love of neighbor (and while you're at, respect and love for yourself). And then do one more thing.

ⁱ Jeremiah 36, especially vv. 20-26.

ⁱⁱ Marcus Borg, “Righteousness,” in *Speaking Christian* (HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2011), pp. 133-141.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ideas sparked by a couple of posts on social media, Steven Koski's post on Instagram and a Twitter post:

