

Pastor Roy's Sermon from July 2, 2017

What does it mean to welcome another? To be gracious? To give dignity? To show concern? To invite into relationship? To create space for another?

When have you felt welcomed? Summer of 1988 (the year it hit 105 several days in a row here, but not in California) during my college years—I stayed at 8 homes in 10 weeks and I learned something about hospitality and welcome. Pastor's wife with migraines. Delicious lemon trees in their back yard. There was a young family—new church start meeting in an elementary school cafeteria which ultimately did not take. I learned—amazingly with tears—that it is more important to be faithful than to be “successful.” A delightful young family. A little girl with a brand new sibling, jumping with glee on the bed. She threw a piece of bologna at me just for the sheer delight of seeing it fly and probably to make sure her mother was paying attention. Kids have always had me pegged as an easy target. Her mother was mortified and she probably never did it again, but I was pleased to be the one recipient. I tried not to laugh. This was also the pastor who drove us to see the sequoias, whose car shook between 50 and 60 miles an hour. There was the church with the VW van wagon. That was the time when “Back to the Future” was coming out. Those are fun vehicles to drive. There was the week of camp with the inner city kids who were a delight from Oakland. There were the churches in El Rodeo and San Pedro where I learned it did make a social difference in some places whether your house is high up on a hill or down low on the flat ground. That was a rich summer, full of so many memories and lessons and simple acts of kindness and generosity.

This past Thursday I was at Josiah's summer orientation at West Chester University. By the time we got to the dining room for lunch, the tables all had someone at them. But they weren't full, so I chose one with several people at it. At first we just ate, then we chatted a bit about our families, where we lived, and a few things we discovered we had in common. In a sense, we welcomed one another. Eating with strangers is always interesting.

There is something wonderful about meeting a stranger and discovering common ground, the seeds of friendship, even when they don't have a chance to grow. Is there something about welcoming strangers that renews us? Among other things perhaps it reminds us that there are many really decent and caring people out there whom we have never met. As we help and are helped by strangers, we recall that our starting point is grace. Grace from God, grace at work in all of creation. Grace that reorients us away from fears and limitations. Grace that reminds us of goodness given by God and found everywhere we look--if we are looking with eyes of faith.

Welcoming can be as simple as a smile in the grocery store or as challenging as helping to relocate a refugee family or voicing support for people who need to be remembered on the fringes of our society and planet.

Jesus makes the point that to welcome another is to share in the joy, in the blessing, in the reward of that other--regardless. Whether it is Jesus, or a prophet, or a righteous person, or a follower of Jesus, the joy and the sorrow is shared.

We often think of faith and faithfulness in terms of heroic, nearly impossible actions which affect many people or bring about amazing positive changes. Jesus is calling us to share water and space. To listen to the stories of others, to hope and be anxious with them, to love. Jesus is not concerned about who gets the glory, who gets the praise. The universe is not concerned about who gets credit or even who is at fault. Though as human beings we do seem pretty fixated on that because we are afraid of losing control.

When Jesus talks about reward, I'm pretty sure he is not talking about motivation. He is talking about value. Everyone in faith who is faithful has incredibly high value. We're all important. . .Jesus often referred to the least. Perhaps it's because neither he nor his followers could really do much of any good without the help of the whole community. Perhaps in some curious way, the least hold the secrets—can lead us into hope and peace in ways that the successful only dream about. I speak of generosity and trust. Generosity flows from listening to the needs of others. Trust is a discipline that grows out of desperation, not confidence. So the successful tend to know more about earnings and payments than about sharing and generosity.

We are all in this together. Our community rises and falls with each member. There are no important people or unimportant people. Each holds our identity. I wonder if there is a way we can better work together, listen to each other, care for each other, prefer each other in love? As Jesus reminds us, no kind action is ever lost, is ever forgotten. Everyone here is vital to this community. We have no future if we do not work together in love and kindness. Let us welcome one another and the stranger. Amen.