

For the last several weeks, Jesus has spent time instructing the 12 apostles on their mission and the hard facts of what the world will be like for them. He's sending them out to build the kingdom, but he doesn't want them to go blindly. The two past Sundays, we heard him warn of how brother will be set against brother, mother against daughter, father against son. Fun stuff for Father's Day.

Today the emphasis shifts from the responsibilities of the disciples to the responsibilities of those who host them. Just before he sets out to "to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee," Jesus closes with these words from Matthew's Gospel:

"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."

In this brief passage, Jesus uses the word "welcome" six times. In fact, the theme of welcome we hear this morning was important enough to Jesus and to the early Church that it shows up across all four Gospels, often multiple times. In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." From chapter 25: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me." In Luke, Jesus declares, "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." Mark and John's Gospel contain similar verses.

The New Testament contains numerous examples of this focus on hospitality and compassionate welcome—especially welcome of those for whom society typically spares not a second thought: the stranger, the poor, the outcast. It's an interesting theme to consider, in a world that puts a huge premium on determining who's worthy of welcome and who's not. Welcome is far from a universally understood term.

Consider the two vessels recently lost at sea, some 4,000 miles apart: one a fishing boat with 500-700 migrants, many women and children, from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine; the other a submersible with five men who paid \$250,000 each to cruise down to the wreckage of the Titanic.

The response to the missing submersible involved a massive, multi-million-dollar, multinational search and rescue operation and five days of almost non-stop media coverage. The migrant boat, by contrast, barely made a blip in the headlines. Greek authorities reportedly knew the vessel was in trouble, tracked it for 12 hours, and never activated a rescue operation.

Some hailed the five maritime tourists as “courageous...souls who died seeking out adventure and overcoming fear.”<sup>1</sup> The 700 missing migrants, now presumed dead, have been all but forgotten. They are among the estimated 2,000 migrants who've drowned in the Mediterranean this past year alone.

The disparity in both the response to and the coverage of these two tragedies says many things about our society: a fascination with wealth and celebrity, an

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<sup>1</sup> [We've reached a new low in the media's 'tabloidification' of tragedies \(msn.com\)](http://www.msn.com)

apathy toward the plight of the foreigner, an underlying judgment around whose life is valuable and whose is not.

And certainly, from the Mediterranean Sea to the southern U.S. border, every day brings another debate about whom we should let in, whom we should keep out. The question for us sitting here this morning is: In a world such as this, how do we, the Church, model compassionate welcome?

I can start can by telling you what I see here at Christ Church. Every Sunday morning, I witness the greetings from Yetti, our ministry coordinator and our dedicated ushers, who don't miss a single new face walking through our doors. Each week, we enjoy a clean and inviting space, thanks to our parish administrator Aisha and our sextons, as well as our phenomenal Buildings and Grounds team. Every Sunday, we extend welcome in worship, thanks to our altar guild, choir, readers, and acolytes.

Beyond these walls, we demonstrate compassionate welcome in many ways. Among these: preparing meals for those experiencing food insecurity, supporting under-served families at our local middle school, rebuilding devastated homes across the country, and helping an Afghan refugee family transition to self-sufficiency right here in Howard County.

Christ Church is a model for welcome. It is one reason I am proud to be your deacon. I celebrate this with you, and I know there are places we can grow, where we can stretch the boundaries of our comfort zones, where we can seek additional opportunities to invite and include.

As we commemorate Independence Day this week, it's worth considering another dimension of the complex question of welcome.

On this national holiday, I often reflect on my 20 years of military service. One memory in particular stands out, from my graduation from basic training in 1986. As our company stood in formation on the parade field, a song played through the loudspeakers: Lee Greenwood's 1984 hit "God Bless the USA," also known as the "Proud to be an American" song. The familiar chorus goes: "I'm proud to be an American/Where at least I know I'm free/And I won't forget the men who died/Who gave that right to me/And I gladly stand up/Next to you and defend her still today/Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land/God bless the USA."

Although I joined the Navy just after high school primarily for the education benefits, standing there listening to that song, I felt the first real stirring of patriotism swell within me.

I also recall September 11, 2001, standing in front of a TV in my office at Fort Meade, watching black smoke billow from the Pentagon, thinking of my fellow servicemembers working there.

To be sure, my own identity as an American, and a patriot, has evolved considerably over the years, from how I felt in 1986, to how I felt on 9/11, to how I felt watching the attack on our nation's Capitol on January 6, 2020.

I am grateful to live in the United States, a place where people from other countries flock to, seeking opportunity and security and a chance to live in freedom. And yet still, I am plagued by the knowledge that this country is *fully* free only for those who define freedom: not for the women who've lost their bodily autonomy, not for our discriminated-against LGBTQ+ community members, not

for the Black and Brown people who continue to be systemically oppressed and denied equities in education, housing, healthcare, and the justice system.

Those realities do not negate my appreciation for living in this great democracy. Our national identity is fraught with tension between freedoms: the freedom for a select few to pursue wealth and power, against the freedom for all to live in a peaceful and just society. The freedom for the majority to continue enjoying their privilege, against the freedom of the under-represented to enjoy basic human rights.

And yet, 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday aside, let's remember this is a sermon for hearers of God's word. As disciples of Christ, we are called to rise above both national identities and worldly priorities. We are Christians before we are Americans, or any other country we call home.

But still, our Godly citizenship informs our national one. And we are here now in this time and place, with access to resources and a framework for freedom grounded both in our Constitution and in God's guiding doctrine, the Gospel.

These two citizenships—earthly and heavenly—often sit in conflict with one another. It can be an uncomfortable conflict. But the friction between celebrating our country's independence, even as we struggle for justice for a great many, doesn't bother me. Two opposing things can be true at once. We experience both pain and joy, pride and shame, discord and harmony, fragility and strength.

Each of us experiences this paradox in our own ways, and each must process that within the context of our own faith journeys. And yet, we can still celebrate that we live in a nation where we are *able* to debate such things—and where we can use our voices to advocate for those whose voices are suppressed.

In both our Godly citizenship and our national ones, we're called to consider: What does it mean to welcome with compassion? What does that look like in our congregations, in our communities, in our national institutions and policies, in our relationships with others? What does it mean to welcome as Jesus asks us to: embracing the little ones, the least of us, the overlooked, offering a cool drink in the parched places of this broken world.

As we gather at God's table this morning, let's rejoice in the knowledge that here, we are all welcome, all God's beloved, saved by grace, freed from sin, and made whole. Welcome. Welcome to God's great banquet. Welcome to community. Welcome to love.