

Sermon, June 28, 2020

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome Marsh Mountain Consort, who will provide us with some awesome Special Music.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Cases are spiking again nationally, and many, if not most of our members are in high risk groups. We do not want to endanger them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission work and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is now a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we are resuming the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. We are discussing Race and Racism in America, like the rest of the nation is or at least should be doing right now. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office and we will put you in touch with someone who is smarter than I am about such things. Now today's Stupid Joke:

A friend of mine went home after work Thursday and found his wife crying. He asked, "What's wrong?" And she said, "I spent all afternoon preparing my famous brisket for dinner. But when I went to answer the telephone, the dog ate the whole thing." He said, "Don't worry dear. We can always get another dog."

This has been a tough few weeks for our talented musician friends from Marsh Mountain Consort. Please tell us about it. And let's all keep them in our prayers.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

O God, you direct our lives by your grace, and your words of justice and mercy reshape the world. Mold us into a people who welcome your word and serve one another, through Jesus Christ our savior and Lord, Amen.

A reading from Jeremiah, the twenty-eighth chapter.

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.

But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the tenth chapter. Jesus said to the twelve, "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."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path...Amen.

After many weeks of lengthy scripture readings, today's Gospel lesson is only three verses long, which I'm pretty sure makes it the shortest in the entire three-year Revised Common Lectionary.

Appearing at the end of Matthew chapter ten, these are the closing sentences of Jesus' sometimes challenging and often disturbing Missionary Discourse, which we have been reading over the last few weeks.

Scholars who care about such things say this speech was likely a construct of Matthew's author rather than Jesus himself. Not that they dispute that the words originated with Jesus, but the awkward editing-together of the various parts and their theological, grammatic and distinct vocabulary disparities make it unlikely they were ever spoken to the same group, at the same time, under the same circumstances.

Frankly, I'm more concerned with what Matthew's author did with his materials rather than where he found them and what kind of changes they underwent in the long and varied history of transmission, oral or written, before he began to work with them. Piecing that together often

gives us insight into the needs and circumstances of the community for whom he was writing.

Remember last week Jesus announced he came bringing a sword instead of peace, and promised family infighting and even death for some of his followers because of their faith? (Yikes!) That certainly suggests Matthew's first readers had experienced such difficulties in their own community, and assures us that if we too are so challenged, in the end it will be okay. It's all part of the plan. That's a great message for us in this time and place, in the midst of our own stresses.

Matthew's Missionary Discourse runs a full thirty-eight verses, compared to the eighteen verses of Luke's version, and Mark's grand total of four. Indicating Matthew's early church had faced many more challenges and difficulties, both from without and from within, compared to the early churches of the other two. His version clearly warns of the dangers of Christian discipleship and evangelism, undertaken in a hostile and dangerous world.

Today's reading settles things down a bit, focusing on "welcoming" and the ministry of hospitality. In three short verses Jesus today used the Greek word $\delta\epsilon\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$, usually translated as "Welcome," six times. The word can also mean to "approve of" or otherwise just "accept."

We don't talk about the important ministry of hospitality in this church very often. Luckily, we don't have to, because we have a history of being a pretty welcoming group of folks. I remember you warmly welcomed me the first Sunday I came here as a supply preaching seminary student in December 2004 and most Sundays since.

I also remember when we had a large family of vacationers worshiping with us one Sunday late last Summer, and I watched as many of our regulars sought them out to welcome them right after worship.

When they caught up to me to shake hands at the back door, one gentleman remarked how good it felt to be greeted so warmly by a bunch of strangers. Apparently most of his family members were from large cities where people rarely bother with pleasantries any more. I said something like, “Nice to have you with us. Please come back. And you know what? When life gets back to normal, I bet they will.”

Hospitality is a major theme that runs throughout the Bible, from Genesis through Revelation. In the New Testament, the word *dexomai* or “Welcome” appears 32 times in the gospels alone. Paul used forms of it quite frequently too, along with *proslambanō*, meaning “receive hospitably” and “*filocenia*” literally meaning “love for the stranger.”

Mark and Luke have their own versions of these same verses, but Matthew is the only one to include the line, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.” Now on the surface that sounds nice enough. But on further reflection, frankly, it scares me. Because the welcome extended to prophets in the biblical world is hardly one I’d want. And I bet Jeremiah the prophet, the subject of our first readings the last couple of weeks, would agree.

As I mentioned last week, Jeremiah’s reward for being a prophet was to be insulted, taunted and threatened by his peers. He was thrown into a pit and left to starve to death. Secretly rescued, he was then tossed into prison. In today’s reading he had a disagreement with a rival prophet named Hananiah, who told the people everything was going to be okay. Jeremiah insisted, “No it’s not.” And indeed it was not. Tradition says Jeremiah was later stoned-to-death by an angry mob after he fled to Egypt with a group of Jews escaping the wrath and destruction of Israel that he had forewarned them about.

Welcoming strangers sounds so simple that all people of faith should probably be able to handle it. Although simple welcoming is often not so simple.

Reverend Doctor Yvette Flunder is founder and senior pastor of the City of Refuge United Church of Christ in San Francisco. She is also Presiding Bishop of The Fellowship, a multi-denominational association of fifty-six primarily African American Christian Churches. She is also one heck of a singer. Phylicia Rashad played her in an ABC Television miniseries a few years ago, called, “When We Rise.” Joni Bovill played her in the 2018 movie, “Come Sunday,” which I think is still up on Netflix.

Flunder warns of what she calls an “Oppressive Theology” of welcoming –one in which people welcome only those who look, think, speak and act exactly like we in the dominant culture do. As a Black LGBT person, she has been the victim of that sort of church welcoming far too many times.

Rev. Dr. Flunder says excluding the folks who just don’t seem to fit -in with us, in her words, “Is a Ball and Chain on the heart of the Body of Christ.” She says hospitality is crucial to the gospel and essential to the kingdom. And that Christ liberates us from having to distinguish between who is deserving of kindness and generosity and who is not. In the end, we are ALL the “little ones” who Jesus mentioned. Asked only to love each other the way God loves us.

How easy that should be, don’t you think? To give a thirsty “little one” a cup of cold water? We often imagine, as Jesus warned us the last couple of weeks, that discipleship sometimes entails huge sacrifices and heroic feats. But most of the time discipleship is no more than a little empathy and kindness. Feeding a hungry child. Hugging someone who is grieving—even in times when those hugs can only be virtual ones. Supporting all who are struggling, and maybe picking up a few groceries for a neighbor who really shouldn’t be out in public now because of their age or underlying health issues. Even the littlest things done out of kindness and compassion can have cosmic significance for ALL the

people of this world, that God loves so much that God sacrificed his only Son to save it.

And since not much is really asked of us, maybe we should take some time during this pandemic to recognize and appreciate those children of God who every day are doing so much more than anybody ever asked. Front line health professionals come to mind, along with first responders, like police and fire departments and EMTs.

How about store clerks going to work every day to supply our essential needs, and farmers and truck drivers who keep us filled and fed. I think about teachers, already gearing up for another school year that will likely challenge them like never before. And dedicated volunteers working together to bring positive change to American society, trying to help level the playing field for people of all races, creeds, genders, colors, national origins and religions.

We could each probably be doing more than we are for the benefit of our neighbors. Thankfully sometimes just a virtual hug, a pat on the back, welcoming a stranger, or a cold cup of water is all that's required.

Amen.
