

Proper 8 A June 28, 2020
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None of These Will Lose
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Jesus said, "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 who ever 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. Matthew 10:40-42

At first glance, today's Gospel looks like it is about welcoming others in the name of Jesus. That's one of the reasons why we need to remember to approach scriptures with care because it can be easy to miss the author's original intention, and that can make a big difference. If we look at the fifth word in today's Gospel, we'd see this isn't about us welcoming others, it is about us followers of Jesus being welcomed. The fifth word in today's Gospel is **you**. Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me..." So, today's Gospel isn't about being magnanimous in our welcoming, it is about how we followers of Jesus are welcomed by the world.

Today's Gospel is a smaller part of Matthew's account of Jesus sending his disciples on a mission to heal and be a sign of Jesus' presence in the world. It was prefaced with Jesus warning that there won't always be welcome, there will be rejection and how to respond to rejection. But today we get to hear that when we go out into the world as followers of Jesus, we won't always be rejected. There will be those who will welcome us, and it is important to remember that welcome isn't just a welcome of you or me or our church, it is a welcome of Jesus himself.

We've seen this play out in real life here at Church of the Good Shepherd. When we gave away coffee and donuts on the first days of class at Ohio University, those of us who went out to the sidewalk and spoke with students and staff experienced both rejection and welcome. Because rejection can hurt, it is tempting to focus on the many people who passed us by ignoring us, politely declining us, lecturing us on the evils of sugar, or (my personal favorite) the

people who cross the road to avoid coming near us. But the truth is there are students and staff who stop and talk a while, who took the coffee or donut, who thank us for being there, who wave from a bus or car window as they drive by. While it looks like we are simply giving away stuff on the first day of classes, our intention is deeper. We are out on the sidewalk early in the morning to offer a blessing to our neighborhood and neighbors. We offer this blessing with our presence, and instead of using religious symbols we use coffee and donuts as symbols of treats, of something special to start off the academic year. Some refuse this blessing, and that is their choice. Some welcome it, and in so doing, they are welcoming not just those of us sitting on the steps of the church, they are welcoming Jesus, just a little bit, and therefore God. It is not meant to be a proselytizing moment, we aren't trying to buy new parishioners by giving away stuff, it is simply a way of showing God is love by showing our love to our community.

Those moments of welcome are full of joy. One reason for the joy is experiencing for a moment what it is like to step back and make room, only this time we are the ones someone made a little bit of room for. That is what can happen when Jesus is welcomed. Room is made for Jesus and all Jesus brings, love of God, love of neighbor, and that brings joy. And it can be fun to be part of that and watch it happen. It might make you wonder why more people don't want to welcome us.

Perhaps one reason people are hesitant to welcome us, or welcome Jesus, is they are afraid of what they will lose. At the end of the three verses of today's Gospel we hear Jesus say those who welcome you, him, God (the one who sent him), the prophet, the righteous, those who welcome a disciple will not lose their reward. Sometimes I wonder if that fear of losing is one of the reasons why people do not welcome Jesus or make changes that show care for all people. This pandemic has shown us a lot of loss. There has been more than 122,000 people who have died from COVID-19 in our country, leaving behind orphaned children, widowed spouses, and friends. Millions of people have lost jobs. And while for many people these losses have humbled us, made us realize there is nothing in life we can control, that life has a tragic side, has made us feel empathy, a connection to each other and a renewed or new sense of social justice, others feel fear of losing what they have and value, which can lead to hoarding, ignoring family, friends, or community, even to acts of hate.

While not as extreme, we see this in real life when people refuse to wear masks in public, even though there is significant evidence doing so can stop transmission of the COVID-19 virus, or refuse to social distance because they don't like it or it makes them feel uncomfortable. Maybe they don't like these practices because they make them feel like something has been taken away, that they have lost a freedom or a status. In conversations about returning to in-person parish life, I have heard people from around the diocese and in other dioceses say they won't go to church because the changes we need to make to reduce the risk of spreading the virus means losing too much of what they like about church. So, they don't plan on going back to church not because they are afraid of the virus -- they're not afraid of the virus -- they aren't going to return to church because it will be different and church will be missing things they enjoy.

Loss is not an easy thing. It is hard to let go when we must make changes. What can make loss so painful is acknowledging and missing who and what is gone. But when someone is focused only on what they are losing, they are missing not only what is still possible, they are missing the presence of the Holy Spirit who is with us in all this and who grieves losses especially losses due to injustice with us. And that might be why they feel fear.

Loss doesn't have to make us or anyone afraid. Remember, Jesus said those who welcome his followers and him won't lose their reward. I'm pretty sure Jesus doesn't mean a reward to be a star in a crown, or a free cup of coffee when you purchase eight at full price. Rewards for Jesus aren't gimmicks getting us to buy into what he is selling. Jesus was talking about the joy a person feels when they make space for him in their lives, and when we are the ones welcomed in his name, it's the joy we share with Jesus. If we think about all this during our planning to return to in-person parish life, we must acknowledge we will lose things like hugs, singing, and Holy Eucharist. We have to in order to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus. But there is plenty we will still have. We won't lose each other, we won't lose the ability to pray together, and we certainly won't lose the presence of the Holy Spirit. We won't lose our mission. It is our responsibility to do the work of changing our ministries and worship so that we can continue our mission to be present to our neighbors in ways that reduce the risks of spreading the COVID-19 virus and to do what we can to protect each other's health.

One way we've already been doing this is by turning the yard in front of the church into a votive prayer hill. The prayer stakes with gold ribbons on them are

an invitation for our parishioners and neighbors to join with us in prayer, prayer for our local community, our country, our world. They are both a visual and spiritual symbol of our active presence in our neighborhood, even when we can't be there in person as much as we'd like. Instead of focusing on the loss of the public use of our chapel, we turned the focus to our other resources, ones that are safer right now, and invited our neighbors to share those resources with us. Each prayer stake in the lawn is a sign of welcome, of someone welcoming us, and therefore welcoming Jesus. That's why seeing them brings us a feeling of joy. And proves that while there are changes we need to make, those changes don't mean we lose the love of God in Christ or the presence of the Holy Spirit, that there can still be joy.

These are days our community needs this presence. Perhaps today's Gospel reading with its reminder that those who welcome us, and welcome Jesus don't lose the joy welcoming brings comes at the perfect time. It's reminding us not to stay absent from each other or our neighbors or the world. We are to find new ways to be present, even if it means wearing masks, or for the immune compromised to find new ways to be engaged at home, to continue to offer rest, prayer, and blessing to our neighbors. Making the changes to our worship services and ministries can show our neighbors we care so much, we'll let go of some of our treasured practices for a while, or modify them, so that we can be present. Perhaps our neighbors will see our courage and faith and this will inspire them to welcome us, to make room for Jesus and discover there is nothing to fear, that no loss, no matter how painful, can ever separate anyone from the love of God in Christ.

And that can bring much needed joy to us all.e