

Matthew 10:40-42

FAITHFUL GOD, YOUR LOVE STANDS FIRM FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION; YOUR MERCY IS ALWAYS ABUNDANT. GIVE US OPEN AND UNDERSTANDING HEARTS, THAT HAVING HEARD YOUR WORD, WE MAY SEEK CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN ALL WHOM WE MEET. AMEN.

WELCOME. IT'S SUCH A COMMON WORD. A WORD DISPLAYED ON FLOOR MATS IN ALL SORTS OF ENTRYWAYS. SIGNS OUTSIDE OUR HOMES. IT'S OFTEN ON ROAD SIGNS AS ONE ENTERS A NEW STATE, A NEW TOWN. THERE ARE PLACES WHERE EMPLOYEES OFFER A WELCOME AS YOU ENTER THEIR STORE.

WHILE WE USE THE WORD CASUALLY AND COMMERCIALY, MAKING ONE FEEL WELCOME IS NOT AS SIMPLE AS OFFERING A WORD, THOUGH IT OFTEN STARTS THERE. THE ART OF MAKING ONE WELCOME IS ROOTED IN THE ANCIENT PRACTICES OF HOSPITALITY.

PERPARING TO WELCOME SOMEONE TAKES THOUGHT AND INTENTION. THOSE GIFTED IN THE ART OF HOSPITALITY ARE ALWAYS READY WITH A WARM WELCOME; A BEVERAGE, FOOD, COMFORTABLE CHAIR, A FEW THOUGHTFUL AND RESPECTFUL QUESTIONS FOR THEIR GUEST. THEIR VERY PRESENCE SEEMS TO WIPE AWAY THE STRANGENESS OR AWKARDENESS OF SOCIAL GREETING AND MAKE ONE FEEL AS IF THEY ARE HOME. IF YOU'VE EVER BEEN THE RECIPIENT OF SUCH HOSPITALITY, YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I MEAN. YEARS AGO IN A CONGREGATION I SERVED, MEMBERS WERE INVITED AND ENCOURAGED TO TAKE A SPIRITUAL GIFT INVENTORY IN WHICH HOSPITALITY WAS ONE OF THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS.

FOR JEWS AND CHRISTIANS, SUCH HOSPITALITY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF WHO WE ARE. THE CALL TO WELCOME THE STRANGER IS ANCHORED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND WAS PART OF THE MEASURE OF THE HEBREW COMMUNITY'S FAITHFULNESS TO GOD. WHEN A TRAVELER CAME TO TOWN, THEY WAITED BY THE WELL, AND IT WAS INCUMBENT UPON THE VILLAGERS TO HOUSE AND FEED THE VISITOR FOR THE NIGHT.

OF COURSE, THESE TRAVELERS WERE RARELY FAMILY. THESE WERE FOLKS UNKNOWN TO THE COMMUNITY. THEY WERE FOREIGNERS, PEOPLE WHO ATE DIFFERENT FOODS, WORE

DIFFERENT CLOTHES, SPOKE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. OPENING ONE'S HOME WAS RISKY. TODAY WE'D DESCRIBE SUCH A THING AS OUT AND OUT FOOLISH. AS ONE WRITER SAYS: "JUST AS THE HUMAN NEED FOR HOSPITALITY IS A CONSTANT, SO, IT SEEMS, IS THE HUMAN FEAR OF THE STRANGER." BUT SUCH HOSPITALITY WAS CENTRAL TO THE HEBREW IDENTITY. THE RISK DID NOT DEFINE THE PEOPLE; THEIR HOSPITALITY DID, BECAUSE THEY KNEW SUCH HOSPITALITY WAS CENTRAL TO THE CHARACTER OF THEIR GOD.

THE SAME WAS TRUE IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES. PAUL REMINDED THE ROMANS TO OFFER HOSPITALITY TO THE ALIEN, AND IN THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS THE PEOPLE WERE REMINDED TO SHOW HOSPITALITY TO ALL FOR IN SO DOING SOME ENTERTAINED ANGELS UNAWARE. AND IN MATTHEW'S COMMUNITY, HOSPITALITY STILL MEASURED THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE PEOPLE.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING COMES AT THE END OF A CONVERSATION THAT JESUS HAS HAD WITH THE DISCIPLES THAT WE CALL THE MISSIONARY DISCOURSE. WHILE MUCH OF THE MISSIONARY DISCOURSE FOCUSES ON THE FATE OF THE DISCIPLES THEMSELVES, TODAY'S PASSAGE ADDRESSES THE REWARDS OF THOSE WHO HEAR THE GOSPEL AND SHOW HOSPITALITY TO THOSE WHOM JESUS SENDS THEIR WAY. IN JUST A FEW SHORT SENTENCES OF POWER AND COMPASSION, WE ARE CHALLENGED TO THINK MORE DEEPLY ABOUT WHAT IS MEANT BY WELCOMING ONE ANOTHER. OUR OFFERING OF A COMPASSIONATE WELCOME OR HOLY HOSPITALITY IS A FORM OF SERVICE TO CHRIST.

IT CAN BE AS SIMPLE AS OFFERING A GLASS OF WATER. IN TODAY'S READING, JESUS MENTIONS A CUP OF COLD WATER TO INDICATE NOT ONLY HOSPITALITY BUT SACRIFICE: TO OFFER COLD WATER REQUIRED DRAWING WATER FROM A DEEP WELL AND OFTEN CARRYING IT UPHILL IN A HEAVY JAR TO THE FAMILY HOME. WHO WOULD WANT TO DRINK ROOM-TEMPERATURE WATER IF NEW, COLD WELL WATER WAS AVAILABLE? THE SIMPLE ACT OF GIVING A "A CUP OF COLD WATER" TO AN ORDINARY BELIEVER WAS A SACRIFICIAL ACT, A GENEROUS GIFT THAT MIGHT REQUIRE ANOTHER ARDUOUS TRIP DOWNHILL TO THE VILLAGE WELL TO DRAW UP MORE COLD WATER FOR THE HOUSEHOLD.

HOSPITALITY IS A MARK OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP, A QUALITY OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, AN EXPRESSION OF COMMITMENT TO GROW IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS.

REV. ADAM HAMILTON SHARES THE FOLLOWING STORY ABOUT GRAPEVINE FAITH HIGH SCHOOL, A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IN TEXAS. THE GRAPEVINE FAITH FOOTBALL TEAM WAS SET TO WIN THEIR DIVISION. THEY HAD WON 6 GAMES AND LOST 2. IT WAS THE LAST GAME OF THE SEASON. IT WAS A HOME GAME WHICH MEANT HOME-TEAM ADVANTAGE WITH THE FULL STUDENT BODY IN ATTENDANCE, THE MARCHING BAND, DANCE TEAM, PARENTS AND FANS AND ALL THE LOCALS IN ATTENDANCE.

GRAPEVINE FAITH WAS GOING TO PLAY THE GAINSVILLE STATE TEAM. GAINSVILLE HAD LOST EVERY GAME OF THE SEASON. THEY HAD ONLY SCORED TWO TOUCHDOWNS ALL SEASON. SO IT WAS GOING TO BE AN EASY TRIUMPHANT, CELEBRATORY GAME FOR GRAPEVINE FAITH. PLUS THE GAINSVILLE TEAM WOULD HAVE NO PARENTS, NO FAMILY MEMBERS, NO FRIENDS AND NO CHEERLEADERS TO SUPPORT THEM BECAUSE GAINSVILLE WAS A YOUTH MAXIMUM SECURITY FACILITY AND THE TEAM WOULD ARRIVE ON A BUS WITH SECURITY GUARDS.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO? AS A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL, HOW DO YOU OFFER HOSPITALITY FOR A FRIDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL GAME WITH YOUR SIDE PUMPED TO WIN THE DIVISION WITH PACKED STANDS AND THE WHOLE COMMUNITY EXCITED FOR THE WIN, WHILE THE BLEACHERS ON THE OTHER SIDE WOULD BE EMPTY AND THE OPPOSING TEAM EXPECTING TO LOSE THE GAME. WHAT WOULD YOU DO? HOW WOULD YOU BEHAVE TOWARDS THE OTHER TEAM? WHAT DOES A COMPASSIONATE WELCOME OR HOLY HOSPITALITY LOOK LIKE?

WELL, THE COACH OF GRAPEVINE FAITH HAD SENT A LETTER TO ALL THE PARENTS OF THE SCHOOL ASKING HALF OF THEM TO SIT ON THE GAINSVILLE SIDE OF THE STADIUM AND CHEER FOR THE GAINSVILLE TEAM, CHEERING AGAINST THEIR OWN CHILDREN. HE ALSO ASKED HALF THE CHEERLEADERS TO CHEER FOR GAINSVILLE. ON THE DAY OF THE GAME 300 VOLUNTEERS FORMED A SPIRIT-LINE AS THE GAINSVILLE TEAM RAN ON THE FIELD AND BROKE THROUGH A BANNER THAT SAID GAINSVILLE TORNADOS WHILE THE STADIUM ERUPTED INTO APPLAUSE. THE GAINSVILLE KIDS WERE DUMBFUNDED AT FIRST, THINKING

THERE WAS SOME MISTAKE. AS THEY PLAYED THE GAME, GRAPEVINE FAITH HAD A COUPLE EARLY TOUCHDOWNS, SO THE COACH PUT IN HIS THIRD-STRING PLAYERS. FOR THE FIRST TIME ALL SEASON GAINSVILLE SCORED 2 TOUCHDOWNS IN ONE GAME. THE GRAPEVINE FAITH PARENTS ROOTED FOR AND CHEERED ON THE GAINSVILLE BOYS. ALTHOUGH THE GAINSVILLE TEAM LOST THE GAME AND ENDED THEIR 0-9 SEASON, THEY WERE SO EXCITED THEY GAVE THEIR COACH A BATH OF WATER FROM GATORADE BOTTLES.

AFTER THE GAME, BOTH TEAMS GATHERED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FIELD TO PRAY AND A BOY FROM GAINSVILLE SURPRISED EVERYONE BY ASKING TO LEAD THE PRAYER, SAYING: *“LORD, I DON’T KNOW HOW THIS HAPPENED, SO I DON’T KNOW HOW TO SAY THANK YOU, BUT I NEVER WOULD’VE KNOWN THERE WAS SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD THAT CARED ABOUT US.”*

THE GAINSVILLE TEAM WAS ESCORTED BACK TO THEIR BUS BY THEIR GUARDS AND GIVEN A PICNIC DINNER BY GRAPEVINE FAITH TO TAKE WITH THEM. AS THE BUS PULLED AWAY THE BOYS CRAMMED ONTO ONE SIDE OF THE BUS TO WAVE TO THE PARENTS WHO WERE WAVING THEM GOODBYE. TEARS WERE FLOWING DOWN MANY FACES.

WHEN THE GRAPEVINE FAITH COACH WAS ASKED WHY HE DID THIS, HE SAID, “IMAGINE IF YOU DIDN’T HAVE A HOME LIFE, OR IF EVERYONE HAD GIVEN UP ON YOU; IMAGINE WHAT IT WOULD MEAN SUDDENLY FOR EVERYONE TO BELIEVE IN YOU?

AS THE BUS WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE, THE GAINSVILLE COACH GRABBED THE GRAPEVINE FAITH COACH AND SAID: “YOU WILL NEVER EVER KNOW HOW MUCH THIS MEANT TO THESE BOYS.”

GRAPEVINE FAITH CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL OFFERED HOLY HOSPITALITY. IT DID NOT COST THEM ANYTHING. THEY WERE GOING TO THE GAME ANYWAY BUT BY THINKING ABOUT THINGS DIFFERENTLY, THEIR ACTIONS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. HOLY HOSPITALITY IS ROOTED IN COMPASSION AND MERCY. IT TAKES THE RESOURCES WE ALREADY HAVE AND USES THEM IN CREATIVE WAYS. HOLY HOSPITALITY TRANSFORMS LIVES. AS WE OFFER HOLY HOSPITALITY WELCOMING OTHERS WE WILL FIND OURSELVES WELCOMING CHRIST AND WE

WILL BE BLESSED BY THE ENCOUNTER. WHY DOES JESUS EXPECT SO MUCH? BECAUSE HE GAVE SO MUCH.

HOSPITALITY IS A MARK OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP, A QUALITY OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, AN EXPRESSION OF COMMITMENT TO GROW IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS. MONDAY, JULY 24, WE WILL HAVE THE AMAZING OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW AND SHARE HOSPITALITY WITH THE GUESTS AT THE HARVEST TABLE. IT IS SUCH AN UPLIFTING EXPERIENCE AS THE HOSPITALITY OF CHRIST IS SHARED. WHEN WE FIRST STARTED THE HARVEST TABLE IN 1999, I MISTAKINGLY THOUGHT I WAS THE GIVER OF THE HOSPITALITY AS I WAS PART OF THE SERVING TEAM, WELCOMING AND VISITING WITH GUESTS. BUT IT SOON DAWNED ON ME, I WAS THE ONE WHO HAD BEEN BLESSED BY THE ENCOUNTER. FUNNY HOW THAT HAPPENS...WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE THE ONE SERVING, YOU END UP BEING THE ONE SERVED BY GOD'S GRACE! I LOOK FORWARD TO SHARING THAT EXPERIENCE AS A CONGREGATION JULY 24. AMEN.