

The UMC of Berea
Genesis 22.1-8; Matthew 10.40-42
4th Sunday after Pentecost

Throughout these Sundays since Pentecost, our scripture readings have invited us to focus on “mission.” Having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, the question now is, *How will we respond? How will we move into the world to help the Spirit in its work of realizing God’s dream?* As we say in our United Methodist mission statement, we exist as church and as a local expression of church to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” *How, then, shall our lives be caught up in this work of making disciples and transforming the world?*

For a third week today, we are in Matthew, chapter 10. Over the last couple weeks, we have been reminded of our calling to go out into the world, to proclaim the gospel—the good news of God’s unconditional, justice-seeking love—in both word and deed. And we have been warned that we will face resistance as we do so, both from *outside of ourselves* and from *within*: that doing God’s work in the world is not easy.

Now, this morning, as we end this 10th chapter of Matthew, we discover that one of our primary practices in living this mission will be the practice of *hospitality*: the practice of compassionate welcome. In the three verses we read today, Jesus uses the word for “receive” or “welcome” six times, pointing us to the importance of hospitality as an act of love through which we participate in building God’s beloved community.

“Whoever receives you receives me,” Jesus says, “and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” By receiving one another—welcoming one another—we are welcoming God. That is a pretty staggering claim, if we are willing to take it to heart and put it into practice. And it is so absolutely crucial to Jesus’ work in the world—and to the life of the early church—that some variation of it shows up in each of the four Gospels and throughout the New Testament.

In Matthew 18, we are told that “whoever welcomes a child welcomes God.” And in Matthew 25: when we welcome a “stranger” we’re welcoming God. The Gospel of Mark echoes both these claims. The Gospel of Luke has Jesus saying that “whoever listens to us listens to Jesus, and whoever rejects us rejects Jesus.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus assures us that “whoever receives someone he sends receives him, and whoever receives him receives the one who sent him.”

Over and over, we find repeated variations on this theme. From Hebrews 13: “Don’t neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have welcomed angels unaware.”

The bottom line is *inclusion, welcoming, meeting folks where they are and receiving them into our lives*. These practices are not just nice or important; they are essential to building the beloved community—necessary for transforming “strangers” and “enemies” into “neighbors.” Jesus and the earliest disciples placed the highest of priorities on actively welcoming one another *and thereby* welcoming the very presence and person of God.

As followers in Jesus’ way of living, we are called to welcome all people: to trust, to be open, and to share. In a divided and frightened world, of course, that does not come easily. We may even set out to do this work with the best of intentions, and yet, left to our own devices, we fall short of this goal and fail really to create and sustain this sort of practice. Often, our pride, ego, self-doubt, and all sorts of other barriers get in the way, keeping us from really connecting,

especially with those who seem to us somehow “different” or “other.” We need God’s grace to break us open: to help us with hospitality, to welcome us into a new way of life.

In an interview a few years back for the public radio program, “On Being,” Isabel Wilkerson—a journalist and author of the 2010 book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*—talked about our need for what she called “radical empathy,” which seems to me very much like our call to hospitality.

Amid all our historic and current struggles to live peaceably with our neighbors—to receive one another and honor and cherish the inherent dignity of every person—Wilkerson suggests that the “essential missing piece...is empathy,” and she goes on to clarify that term:

Empathy is not pity or sympathy.... Pity is looking down on someone and feeling sorry for them. Sympathy is looking across at someone and feeling bad for them. Empathy means getting inside of them, and understanding their reality, looking at their situation and saying not, “What would I do if I were in their position?” but, “What are they doing? And why are they doing what they’re doing from the perspective of what they have endured?” That is an additional step. There are multiple steps that [we must] take to really be open [to one another.]¹

Especially when we live in a culture of fear and inhospitality—valuing individual autonomy and privatized freedoms as our highest goals—there are, indeed, multiple steps we must take to open ourselves to the lives, experiences, and perspectives of our neighbors. But when we take those steps—when we really welcome one another and practice what Wilkerson calls “radical empathy”—then we can be assured that we’re welcoming God.

Our other reading this morning—from Genesis 22—provides a sense of where we might begin this work while illustrating just how radical and challenging our welcome and witness are meant to be. Genesis 22 is part of the larger “Abraham narrative,” sketching the establishment of the covenant between God and us through the characters of Abraham and Sarah. The verses we read today are the beginning of a story known as the “binding of Isaac”: one of the most complex and difficult stories in our scriptures, the story of Abraham being “tested,” asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering.

Obviously, it is a deeply troubling story, and there is a whole lot in it. I am not going to try to tackle all of it this morning, but there is one piece I want to lift up that tells us something about the practice of hospitality. It is a significant little phrase repeated twice by Abraham in the section we just read and which will be repeated again before the story is over. Three words in most of our English translations: “Here I am.” In Hebrew, it is just one word: *hineini*.

Rabbi Norman Cohen has written extensively about the way this single Hebrew word functions in our scriptures, specifically in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and throughout the writings of Isaiah. *Hineini*, according to Cohen—“Here I am”—signifies a person’s willingness to respond *in relationship*, to sacrifice oneself for another: a readiness to act on the other’s behalf no matter the cost to oneself.

In Abraham’s story, by Genesis 22, already a great bit of trust has been built between Abraham and God. Yet still, obviously, it is remarkable how readily Abraham offers himself. God calls, and Abraham responds: *hineini*, “here I am.” Straightforwardly—profoundly—without question or pre-condition, Abraham offers himself, and in doing so, provides us an

¹ From <https://onbeing.org/programs/isabel-wilkerson-this-history-is-long-this-history-is-deep/>, accessed June 25, 2020.

example for making space—within our self-interest, within our preconceptions—making space for the “other,” whether that “other” is our spouse or child, parent or sibling, neighbor, stranger, or even a perceived enemy. *That* is the biblical model of hospitality: a willingness to give up something—to give up *ourselves*—for the sake of receiving another.

Martin Buber—in the first half of the 20th century—wrote about two different types of encounters and conversations we might have. The first is the “I-it” encounter, basically a “monologue” by which we relate to the other person as an *object*: we relate with our own goal already set in mind. There is no need really to listen or make space in this sort of encounter; it is a relationship based in *utility*.

The other type is what Buber called “I-thou.” It is based on *respect* instead of *utility*, and it opens the possibility of “dialogue.” Here, deeply listening and humbly making space—sacrificing our preconceptions and predetermined agenda—holds open the possibility that we will be changed. It is what the Arbinger Institute—in their work, *The Anatomy of Peace*—refers to as “seeing people as people” instead of “seeing people as objects,” valued only to the extent that they are “useful.”

Abraham’s response this morning—first to God and then to Isaac—represents this second type of encounter. God calls. Abraham responds, “here I am,” offering himself freely to God’s call. So, too, with Isaac. Isaac calls, and Abraham responds: “here I am.” In this unimaginably difficult moment, Abraham offers himself to Isaac in the same way he offers himself to God: authentically, humbly, vulnerably. He is present in this moment with Isaac in the same way he has been present with God. And because of that—because of that willingness to make space, to welcome—the two of them, at least for this moment in this terrible story, are able to “walk on together.”

That is the sort of welcome—receiving the “other” and offering ourselves in a relationship of mutual care—that Jesus calls each of us to do. *Welcoming* another person is not “tolerating” them. It is not offering a half-hearted greeting or welcoming “on my own terms.” It is not hearing someone’s concerns while preparing my “counterpoint.” It is offering myself fully, humbly: sacrificing my self-interest for the well-being of another.

Imagine what that could be for us, in such a time and place as this. Imagine what it could be for us as a congregation and in our neighborhoods, in our homes, our personal relationships, and our public policies. Imagine what it could be for our attitudes and conversations and work together if we were to offer ourselves, make space for one another, and listen with a readiness to be changed.

For it is only in receiving one another that we receive the Holy Spirit. It is only in making space for one another that we make space for God. And it is only in welcoming the “other” that we welcome Christ, even if often unaware. Thanks be to God. Amen.

God of our ancestors, who gives us birth by water and the Holy Spirit,
teach us how to live always in integrity of body, mind, and spirit:
in the flow of your reckless love, in the name and spirit of Christ.
Grant that we may receive and respond to you.
Through the Holy Spirit, you brought life to prophets, apostles, and disciples,
freeing us from death and deadly ways of living, leading us more fully into life.
Thank you for your grace, for your generosity, for offering yourself completely to us....
Thank you for calling us to be the body of Christ,
to proclaim the good news of your welcome for all.
We pray today for all whom you call into your work.
May we know the presence of your Spirit to guide, comfort, challenge, and encourage.
We pray for all whose lives may be touched by our witness.
May they feel your hands receiving them with gentleness, kindness, grace, and love.
We pray for the world into which you call us.
Help us to be faithful in giving ourselves away for the sake of your gospel.
In your Spirit, let us show the peace of Christ in a world of violence,
let us share the bread of heaven in a world of deep hunger,
let us offer springs of living water in a world of need.
Lead us with your gifts of faith, hope, and love toward the fullness of your new creation.
Through the power of your Holy Spirit and in the name of Christ,
who teaches us to pray now and always....

- Wayne Appleby—recovering after time in the hospital
- Linda Tucker’s brother, Tom, preparing for open heart surgery
- continued prayers of healing for:
 - o Mary Lou Hunger
 - o Betty Miller
 - o Joyce McGee
 - o Carol Forster
 - o Larry Jelinek
 - o Diane Pauley
 - o all whose lives are being impacted by COVID-19, especially now as cases seem to be surging once again