

Welcoming Others, Welcoming God. Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (A) – July 2, 2017

By Tim Hall, with selections from the homily of The Rev. Machrina Blasdell found on Sermons That Work.

**[RCL:] Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**

We continue and conclude this morning with our reading of chapter 10 from Matthew's gospel... as Jesus wraps up his chapter long commissioning and instruction of the twelve disciples. Two weeks ago we read that Jesus, after a frenetic display of his healing and redemptive power, having compassion on the crowds tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest." And last week, while warning of the challenges of discipleship he tells them, "do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." And later, "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Abraham's faith is profoundly challenged in this morning's reading from Genesis. Can you even imagine it? Suppose you heard God speak to you telling you to sacrifice your most loved possession? What would you do? Would you think to yourself, "that can't be right. I must be misunderstanding. God, I'll just sit tight for now and wait for a clearer message from you."

But that's not what Abraham does. He has already made his commitment to God. He's left his homeland at God's direction, warmly welcomed three strangers in whom he recognized God, walked with them to Sodom where he argued for Sodom's redemption, turned out Hagar and his first born son, Ishmael, having faith in God's command. And now, upon hearing the hardest directive yet from God, he simply gets up early in the morning, prepares his donkey, and goes off with his son Isaac to do as God has commanded. What faith! Abraham totally trusts in God. And God does not disappoint.

Just as God saved Hagar and Ishmael in the desert and created from them *one* great nation, so he saves Isaac and Abraham on the mount of the Lord, providing a ram for the sacrifice and providing for *another* great nation. Oh, that we could have the faith of Abraham. The ability to trust that whatever God asks of us, even if it may not be what we want or envision, God has a plan for us and for the world. And it is good. Oh, that we could have such faith! "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Continuing with our gospel reading, "Jesus said, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.'"

Just so we get this straight: whoever welcomes you welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes your friend or family member or work colleague or elected official or mother-in-law or next door neighbor or chatty seat companion on an airplane or grocery checker or barber or the UPS driver ... and so on and so forth ... welcomes God. Would there ever be an end to such a list of those who are welcome?

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes any one of us welcomes Jesus, and welcomes God.

The message we hear in this morning's gospel reading from Matthew was important enough to Jesus and to the early church that some variation on this theme shows up in each gospel, and often more than once. Later in Matthew's gospel from chapter 18, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me..." and from chapter 25, "The king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, ...you did it to me.'" Mark's gospel, from which much of Matthew's gospel is derived, includes similar verses. In Luke's gospel, Jesus declares that "Whoever listens to you listens to

me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” The Jesus in John’s gospel poetically declares in chapter 13, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

There are numerous other examples and variations throughout the New Testament. The bottom line emphasis seems to be on inclusion, welcome, and doing for others — all those things it takes to build up community, to include the stranger as neighbor. If we believe today’s lesson and so many other passages, Jesus and the early disciples and later apostles put a high value on welcoming and proclaiming the presence of God thereby.

Pause for a moment and think about our present day country and world. There are so many distressing and frightening events that we hear about every day. And there are compelling issues to consider while dealing with our economic situation or our national safety. But if an inhospitable, exclusive attitude is at the heart of our legislation or executive orders, then they are in opposition to the teachings of Jesus, who talked so very much about welcome, inclusion, hospitality, doing for the least.

“Jesus said, ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.’” Is this what we hear? Or do we hear, instead, words of separation, words of breaking relationship, words of opposition and repudiation? Where is our witness to welcoming others, and thereby welcoming Jesus and the one who sent him?

This Sunday falls between two other occasions marked on the Church calendar: the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul last Thursday, and our celebration of American Independence on the 4th of July this Tuesday.

It is important to note this for a number of reasons. First, think about Peter and Paul. They did not agree on many things, didn’t get along at all, and finally went their separate ways in the proclamation of the Gospel. Peter insisted that the early believers must follow Jewish ways, must be circumcised, must hold to the Law. Paul’s vision led him to distant lands proclaiming faith in a risen Christ to the Gentiles and urging new believers to conform their lives to that faith. What they had in common, though, was the conviction that God had visited humanity in Jesus, and that Jesus had brought something new and remarkable to humankind demonstrated in a way to live, a way to relate and a way to witness to God’s love. And they both understood that the welcome of God was an invitation to a place in God’s kingdom.

As we celebrate this 4th of July, singing our patriotic songs – like those we are singing this morning including especially our closing hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, with words by James Weldon Johnson, author of “God’s Trombones” that we studied one Lent a few years back, and music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, two great African Americans, written in 1921 and adopted by the NAACP as the “Negro National Anthem” – As we celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> by grilling hot dogs and hamburgers, marveling at fireworks and the good ol’ red, white and blue; let us also ask ourselves what Jesus meant in telling us over and over again, “Whoever welcomes me (*and BTW I am in everyone*) welcomes the one who sent me”.

We may believe differently about the details of faith, as Peter and Paul certainly did and as Christians are wont to do. We may understand civic responsibility differently; Americans have always held a variety of opinions on things.

But for us as Christian Americans or American Christians, we are called to be welcoming. And although it may seem so very hard at times, God gives us strength and grace, just as it was given to Abraham and the disciples, to persevere in the face of doubt and fear and rejection, through faith in his goodness, mercy, and salvation. For in welcoming others we welcome God. Can we at least agree on that?

~ Amen