

“WELCOME”

7th SUNDAY after PENTECOST
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Matthew 10:40
Church of Our Savior

29 June 2008
Charlottesville VA

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

In many monasteries, nothing is taken more seriously than the worship of God. There are between seven and nine monastic offices (aka services) every day. When the bell rings, the monk or nun is expected to drop any task at hand and proceed without delay to the chapel. Outside of emergencies, there is only one exception to this rule, the arrival of a visitor, whether well-known or a total stranger. When a brother or a sister hears a knock at the outer door, it is time to practice the ministry of hospitality, to welcome the sojourner and stranger. Jesus emphasizes and lives out hospitality. Paul includes it as a spiritual gift. St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, made it part of his Rule.

Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Today’s gospel reading comes at the end of a chapter in which Jesus is sending his apostles—apostle actually means *sent*—to their ministry in the world. He tells them that they and their message will not necessarily be well-received. Where it is, give thanks, heal the sick, teach, and bless those who receive you. Where the message is not well-received, don’t waste your time, leave quickly, and even shake the dust of that town off your feet as you leave the place in your rearview mirror.

Almost exactly 40 years ago, I was leaving Nepal after serving for two years as the most remotely stationed Peace Corps Volunteer in the world, 120 miles from the nearest transportation. It was while I was in Katmandu mustering out that I learned that Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated.

Today, Nepal is a poor, but very busy place. A civil war may or may not be at an end. The King has been deposed. Air pollution in Katmandu is among the worst in the world. By contrast when I was there, Nepal was a poor, but very sleepy place. The King was a beloved figure, thought by many to be the reincarnation of a Hindu god. There were less than 200 cars in Katmandu, and virtually none elsewhere. The air was crisp and clear, save for incense in the many temples and the smell of legal marijuana and hashish.

Out in the very far west, nicknamed the Siberia of Nepal by officials who dreaded being assigned there, was my village of Baitadi. Coming and going was very difficult. It took me six 20-mile days to get there. Ironically, I liked trekking a good lot less than many of my fellow Peace Corps members, but I had by far the longest hike in. I was very much dependent on the kindness of strangers. Despite their extreme poverty, many people were very quick to extend a welcome and hospitality to the first westerner most of them had ever seen.

In fact, I was shocked at dusk after a very hard day on the trail when I had almost fallen off a cliff to enter a village where I was not welcomed, even to sleep with the animals. As I pushed on, I thought I should shake the dust of the village off my feet.

Two weeks ago, the Old Testament lesson told the story of three men who visited Abraham and Sarah at their tent in the desert. It is not clear from the passage whether Abraham knew who they were, or was entertaining angels unawares. In any case, he provided a warm welcome and fine hospitality. By the following year, Abraham and Sarah had been rewarded by becoming very old first-time parents of their son Isaac.

One of the things I've been doing since I retired is a lot of reading. One book, relevant to today's sermon, that I would strongly recommend is *Three Cups of Tea*, a story about Greg Mortenson, a serious mountain climber who barely escapes alive following a failure to make the summit of K-2, the world's second highest mountain. Nearly dead, he wanders into a remote village in Northwest Pakistan, a *mujahadin* (conservative Islamic freedom fighters) area. It takes a good while for him to regain his strength, while living in the house of the village leader.

When he is finally strong enough to return to America, he asks the headman what he can do to thank him and the other villagers for their hospitality—note today's gospel. The reply is simple: build a school here—for girls. To cut to the chase, Mortenson has now completed 55 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, all of them in conservative Islamic villages.

Some time after 2001, going into an area in Afghanistan, not unlike where Osama Bin Laden is thought to be hiding, he is arrested. After the warlord interrogates him and discovers who he is, they sit down together to make plans for schools in the region. His reputation has preceded him. He is known, even across the border, as a genuine hero.

Having grown up in Tanzania as the son of Christian missionaries, Mortenson only judges the human need. He discusses religious ideas with his Muslim hosts, but always with respect. They return that respect. The author of the book makes the case that Greg Mortenson has done more to undercut terrorism and gain friends for the United States than any American government official or program. When he asks how he can repay the kindness of his first host, he knows nothing about building schools, or anything else. He's since had lots of practice.

Hospitality, welcoming the stranger is one of the ways we can be followers of Jesus, This is true in the church, and it is also true in our nation. One of the great things about America is that we have always been a land of immigrants. Illegal immigration has been in the news over the past couple of years especially. It is a problem but, as followers of Jesus, we need to look upon it as an opportunity, a problem that we need to find ways to solve with true compassion.

Jesus speaks of welcome. Paul names hospitality as a gift of the Spirit. Abraham feeds and waters the strangers who suddenly appear at the door of his tent. Saint Benedict gives

hospitality an important place in his Rule. A Muslim leader in a remote area of Pakistan saves the life of the infidel who lurches into his village. In a variety of ways, life calls us into ministry. Practice hospitality and it may well be that our lives will change.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (Romans 12:9-13)

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:1-2)