

“Welcoming Jesus”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Let's get right into it. The verses we read today from Matthew's gospel, one of those (four stories) we have in the Bible about Jesus' life, come at the close of a chapter in which Jesus is getting ready to send out his followers as his witnesses. He's about to launch them. He's about to release them. He's about to turn them loose (into the world) and let them do what he has been preparing them (for the past couple of years) to do.

In the process, he's also preparing them for what they might experience when they do it. It's not going to be easy. It's not going to “just happen” because they want it to happen. For it to happen, for lives to be changed and drawn to Jesus, their witness, their words, their lives...it might come at a cost.

Read through the chapter. Jesus is as straightforward as he can be. (He says), “Here's what you can expect to happen, when you share your faith. Here's what you can expect to (find happen), when you talk about the relationship you have with me.” It's not hard to follow. (He says), “Some will receive you and others will not. Some will accept what you have to say and others won't even let you start.”

(And so), before you start (he says), “If they accept you and you're welcomed, then stay and spend some time. If they don't and (you're not), then brush off the dust and move on.” But, either way, he says, don't be afraid. Either way (he tells them), don't worry about what others might say (and think). And either way, (regardless of what happens), don't ever forget what God has said and what he thinks.

“Welcoming Jesus.” As I was preparing for today's message and thinking about what happened this past week (in our Vacation Bible School), along with what's going to happen this (next week) when our Mission team goes down into Mexico, I couldn't help but notice the connection. There are actually (two connections) in our story, and they both have to do with the connection we have to Christ.

The first is tied to the simple fact that (this past week) we had many people here, many who had (stepped up), whose main reason for (being here) and stepping up was to serve and to help. That was their main reason. They were here to serve and to help.

Now, they each had different jobs during the week. (There was a lot of work to do.) Their tasks (among them) and each day were not the same.

Some were here as crew leaders. Others were here as staff. Some were leading songs. Others were leading games. Some were here, working behind the scenes, others (more visible) and up front. Still others, they were here because they knew they needed (to be here), and so whatever they were asked to do they did.

It didn't matter, because the reason they were here was to serve and to help. And they did it, and it all came together, and (in the process) the kids learned about God and why they were created. As a result, it was a great week, and it was a great week (in large part) because of a long list of people willing to serve and to help.

The connection, however, to our text, is not in the fact that we had a long list of willing and able and hardworking and sacrificing volunteers. That's not the connection. The connection is that in their willingness and their abilities and their hard work and their sacrifice, they were representing and serving and giving of their time and energies in the name of Christ.

In our verses today, that's exactly what Jesus tells his followers. In our text, that's exactly what Jesus is telling us. Before he sends us out, before he turns us loose, before we end up doing whatever it is we are going to do (in our lives) in the name of Jesus, and end up facing whatever it was we're going to face. Do you remember what he says? Do you remember the connection he makes?

He says, when you serve, when you help, when you give of your time and energies and efforts, in my name, (Jesus says), “If they receive you, they receive me, and if they receive me, they receive the one who sent me.”

In other words, when we serve and we help (in the name of Jesus), we give to those we serve and we help an opportunity to meet him. (That’s what we do.) And as they meet him, (they meet Jesus), they also meet the Father. That’s the connection to our story. That’s the connection that is made. And that’s (the connection) that happened this past week, to the many children who were here.

Don’t miss the importance. Through the volunteers and the support and the energies and efforts of those who were willing (and able) to give, those children had an opportunity (in a very real way) to come face-to-face with Christ. That’s what they did. That’s what they had a chance to do. And they did it and they had the chance, and they met and they learned from and they came to know and (in the process) they were able to welcome Jesus.

I hope you know that about how this all works. I hope you understand that about how God has chosen to work. (This is nothing new.) We are his messengers. We are the ones called and sent into the world to represent Jesus.

No one else (in this world) will do that. (You’ve probably noticed that.) We are the ones he has called. We are the only ones who will. And so, if we don’t do it, if it doesn’t happen through us, the world will never have a chance to meet him. That’s how it works. That’s how God has chosen to work. And that’s the calling you and I have been given in Christ.

My friends, don’t underestimate what God can do through your willingness to serve and to help in his name. In a very real way, God uses our efforts to build his kingdom.

Just think about it. How did I learn about Jesus? (How did you learn?) I learned through my Mom and my Dad, to be sure. I was blessed to grow up in a Christian home. Your kids (and grandkids) will be blessed if they are raised and (on a regular basis) have a chance to learn about Jesus. (They will.) I also learned about Jesus through the many people (I never even realized) and probably will never even remember, who gave of their time and abilities and energies in service of Christ. My guess is, (for many of you), it was the same.

That’s how it works. (God’s plan is simple.) As we offer ourselves to Jesus, others (through us) have a chance to meet him. (It’s not hard to follow.) It’s easy to follow. But it’s important (to follow) and it’s essential (that we do follow), if others are ever to have a chance to follow.

“Welcoming Jesus.” That’s the first connection with our story. In offering ourselves to others (in the name of Jesus), others (through us) have a chance to meet him.

The second connection has to do with what happens when we offer ourselves to Jesus, and how, in offering ourselves to Jesus, we find ourselves (in a similar way) connected to others. And (here) I want to tie this not (so much) to what happened (this past week) in our Vacation Bible School, but to what’s going to be happening (in this following week) through the team we’re sending into Mexico.

This coming Saturday (as we’ve heard), we have a team of 48 people traveling into Tijuana to build 8 homes for families in need. These are families, not randomly picked, but ones purposefully selected because of their (already existing) connection to the church. These are faithful people. They are faith-filled families. And they’ve been selected (for these new homes) because they’re families in need, and (the need) is obvious, and it breaks your heart how they live. For many (on our teams), it’s the first time they’ve seen it and it changes the way they live. It’s a great experience.

The most fascinating part of the trip (at least for me), in the years I’ve gone, the one that has always caught my attention, is not the obvious difference (we see) between us and them, coming into their poor culture (as we are), coming out of the affluence we have. No, what’s stood out (for me) and what’s been (so fascinating), in spite of the difference, is the clear and undeniable connection that’s (already there) because of

Christ. You walk into that culture (and meet those families), when you do, they're total strangers. They're people we've never met and (for most of us) the language is a real barrier. (It is.)

I can say "Buenos dias" and "Como esta?" and "Donde esta el bano?" and "Hasta manana." That's about it, as far as I can get. But (in spite of that), there's a connection that is already there, and it's a connection (already there) because of Jesus.

In the final verse of this chapter, (before sending his followers out), Jesus reminds them that it doesn't have to be lot in order for it to work. It's often the smallest things we do that make the biggest difference. It's often the little things we do (in his name) that matter the most. "Even a cup of cold water" (Jesus says), given as a follower of his, can be enough.

Now, here's the connection we need to make. (Here's what Jesus wants us to see.) Did you know the word "hospitality", where it comes from? Jesus says we are to be a hospitable people...welcoming people in, give and serving in his name...even "a cup of cold water," wherever we go, whatever we do.

Do you know where that word comes from? The word "hospitality", it comes from two words: the one meaning stranger, the other meaning friend; the one meaning stranger, the other meaning friend. To be hospitable means to welcome a stranger as if they were your friend; more literally, it means to turn that stranger into a friend.

Look around for a moment and notice who is here. (Go ahead, look around.) This is quite the group of people. (It really is.) This particular group of people, there's no way in the world (this group) would have come together apart from Jesus. There's no way. Most of us, (apart from Jesus) never would have met, let alone become friends.

But there's the connection, the one we have with Christ. It links us not only to the cross and to our Savior and to what God has promised for us in him, but it also links us to each other in a way that never would have happened apart from Jesus.

When that group of 48 travels into Mexico, I can already predict the connection they will have with each other, because they will be going and serving and giving of their time and energies in the name of Christ. And when they meet the families they will serve, without having yet met them, I can already see the connection that will be there, and it'll be there because of Jesus.

My friends, it's no different for us. It's no different for you. When you go in the name of Jesus (and do in your life) what God is calling you to do, through you, God will be working to give others a chance to meet him. And when you go and you do, (even the little things) you're called to do, because of your connection with Christ, don't be surprised when that one who truly was a stranger actually becomes a friend.

Let me close with this. Did you notice (in these three verses) that (three times) Jesus mentions "a reward"? (He says) there's the reward "of a prophet" to the one who "receives a prophet." There's the reward of "a righteous man" to the one who "receives a righteous man." And then, (he says), there's a reward for the one, "because he (or she) is a disciple of Jesus", who gives "even a cup of cold water" to someone else.

Do you know what's interesting about this "reward" when it comes to following Jesus? What's interesting is that when you follow Jesus, the reward you're going to (one day receive) is not what you're thinking about. (It's not.) You don't even think about the fact that (one day) you're going to receive a reward for what you're doing. (It's not even on your mind.) Do you know why? Because the reward you will (one day receive) in full (in heaven), is already being realized (in part) in the connection you have (in your life), here and now, with Christ.

Welcoming Jesus...connected to each other and to him. Let's pray.