

“All are Welcome”  
July, 2, 2023  
St. Ben’s Episcopal

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Holy one.

When I was in college, I spent Spring Break on service trips with our Baptist Campus Ministries. I wasn’t a part of their ministry during the year, but they welcomed me and a handful of other “trip-only” students for a week-long experience. They partnered with Habitat for Humanity and we worked on whatever the local chapter needed. Coincidentally the churches that hosted us each year were local Episcopal churches. We slept in their great halls, and they provided rooms for bible study and kitchens to cook in. We could also go into the sanctuary to pray at night if we felt like it. On my first trip, we ended up in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, a very small town with high poverty rates and few resources for assistance. Our job was to dig the footings so they could pour the concrete foundation for next week's upcoming group build. Not the most glamorous assignment in the rock-filled dirt, but still important, and I got to learn how to use a pickaxe. One thing none of us planned for was the unseasonably cold weather we encountered when we got there. Luckily the local gas station happened to carry stocking caps. They had just enough for all of us. I’m sure we were quite the scene in our dirt-covered clothes buying hats in the middle of spring. The day after we

arrived we got to have lunch with the family whose house we were helping to build. Mom, Dad, and three kids were just as excited to meet us as we were to meet them. The room was a buzz with conversation and connection. Each of us a bit surprised at how much we had in common. The genuine connection over our meal sparked quite the conversation during our bible study later that night. We were all overwhelmed by the welcome we had felt, so talking it through over a hot cup of coffee was a great way to end our day. We weren't quite sure how to thank the family for their generous hospitality, and our trip leaders recommended that we consider the gift may have been in our generous reception of their hospitality, along with the welcome we showed them during lunch. Being able to connect with them on a personal level meant something, they said. We saw them and heard their stories. Those actions mean something, and we shouldn't discount that.

In our gospel text for today, we find the concluding portion of the missionary discourse in Matthew's Gospel. In the previous sections of this discourse, we see Jesus providing instruction on what the disciples are to do and the dangers they will face, and now we hear Jesus talking about the rewards and compensation for those who will welcome them on their journey ahead. This discourse begins by sharing what it means for those who stay within the boundaries of those like them. Prophets will receive a prophet's reward when welcomed in the name of a prophet, and similarly for the righteous. Yet the one who offers the cold

cup of water to the little ones in the name of the disciples is set aside as those whose reward will last forever. Here, little ones refer to the early Christians as they begin to expand and create their new community. In this way, Jesus is saying that by welcoming in the stranger, one's reward lasts forever. The reward goes beyond the local context and into God's Kingdom. When we put this text in conversation and context with the earlier verses of Matthew's Gospel, we also know that this process and journey isn't easy. Jesus is very clear in preparing them for a challenging road ahead. And similarly challenging is the work of true welcome.

In welcoming the stranger, we welcome all of them, their vulnerabilities, their past interactions with religious and spiritual communities, and their ideas about what community can and should be.

Jesus' instructions invite us to understand welcome as an action serving God. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." But what does it really mean to welcome someone as we would welcome God?

To love them without condition and to honor them as they are.

Our Baptismal Covenant reminds us that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves and striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Yet, as we welcome people, We must ask ourselves are we inviting them to come as they are or are we expecting them to show up as we would like them to be. Are there unwritten rules about silence or stillness? Maybe even language or lingo we aren't even aware we are using that might become a barrier for some to feel truly welcome.

To create a space where anyone can truly bring all of who they are to church and be welcomed, often means we find ourselves feeling uncomfortable in some way.

It can be a disservice when we fail to acknowledge that change, difference, or the unfamiliar isn't uncomfortable. It should be. That discomfort is what lets us know we are growing and, as a community, something we are called to do together as we welcome everyone as they are, including ourselves, and our own life changes.

Luckily, none of this happens without God's help, an important component of the Baptismal Covenant response.

Now the family from my Spring Break trip was one of the earliest examples of true welcome I can remember. Their actions were a generous welcome into their home, which hadn't even been built yet, and an inspiration to all of us that were there. The day after we met them, they brought us homemade cookies, hot chocolate, and all the gloves and mittens they had at their place, for us to use if we needed them. We must have looked so pitiful in our multiple layers of t-shirts and whatever clothes we had brought with us to keep warm and, of

course our gas station hats. This gesture of kindness was so moving that we all decided on the night before we left, to go back to our gas station friends, buy whatever hats they had left, washed the ones we had been using, and then added them to the gloves and mittens to return to our newfound family friends. We were all in tears as we said goodbye to each other, knowing how deeply the short time we spent together connected us.

The ebbs and flows of our own lives and the life of our community are similar in many ways. You also welcomed me, and the ministry of challenging us to take the work of the church outside the walls to the people of Los Osos, with God's help. You were already a people in action, yet we continue to grow in understanding of what it means to meet people where they are instead of expecting folks only to come to us.

Our work of growing together as a community continues as we show up for each other during this time of transition. I find the words of our aspirational statement, Whoever you are and wherever you are in your faith journey, there is a warm welcome for you here at St. Benedict's continues to move and guide our community forward.

My prayer for us all is that it guides us toward understanding the stranger courageous enough to walk through the doors, helps us to lean into the discomfort of growth, reminds us of our connection with this

gathered community, and the peace of knowing we do all of this with  
God's help. **Amen**