

Yr. A, Proper 8
June 29, 2008
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1586 words

Lessons:
Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Jeremiah 28:5-9
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Somewhere out there in the Church this week is a priest who just spent the week poring over this short Gospel lesson from Matthew. And she is thinking about her next call as an ordained minister. She has seen St. Martin's in the most recent Church Deployment listing of new openings and she has heard from a friend of a friend that it is a good place to serve.

She was beaten up by her last congregation upon her arrival. A small but influential group wasn't quite ready to call a female priest there. She is comforted by these words from Jesus, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."¹

Somewhere out there in the Church this week is a prophet with an insatiable appetite to preach the Good—and hard—News of the Gospel. And he is thinking about his next call as one who speaks the truth.

He has seen St. Martin's parish profile on our web site; and he has looked at a few others as well. He has endured more than a few wounds from his present congregation. They resent the idea that someone needs to preach so passionately about justice to *them*. He finds hope in these words from Jesus, "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward."²

Somewhere out there in the Church this week is a pastor who has a heart for people. This pastor is eager to care for a congregation and equip them for *their* ministry, but this pastor—like *all* pastors—has also made some mistakes along the way. You see, even the righteous make mistakes!

It is a season for a change and a chance to serve a congregation that wants to be cared for and equipped for ministry. St. Martin's was mentioned in an email from an old seminary friend. And this pastor quietly reflects on these comforting words from Jesus, "Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous."³

This morning I want to suggest that the Gospel is not just written *to* you. It is also written *about* you. Before we interpret the Good News as if *we* are the ones being sent, I want us to give some prayerful thought to the idea that we are—at the same time—the ones called to welcome the apostle, the prophet, and the righteous one who is about to be sent our way.

Several weeks ago this congregation spontaneously joined in with the intercessor to help pray the Collect for the search of a new rector. In response to your initiative, the worship staff subsequently italicized this prayer in your bulletin to indicate that we want everyone to pray this Collect in unison from now on.

¹ Matthew 10:40

² Matthew 10:41

³ Matthew 10:41

Your eagerness to pray this Collect is a good sign. It suggests your eagerness to welcome a pastor, priest and teacher into our midst. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, none of these (who welcome my disciples) will lose their reward.”¹

Let me remind you that this welcoming business is not necessarily going to be natural or easy.

The all important 1st sermon preached by the new rector might end up being a bit too long, or somewhat hard to follow, or even a little dull. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

Your phone call seeking an appointment to sit down and talk with the new rector might not get returned as quickly as you think it should. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

Your first personal encounter with the new rector might seem a bit awkward, leaving you to wonder if your new pastor is aloof or perhaps just a bit introverted. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

Your favorite program, or class, or outreach project, or weekday Eucharist, or committee, or group, or budget line item might get cancelled, rescheduled, or changed in some other way that you don’t understand and that you certainly don’t like. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

Your present group of clergy may not necessarily be part of the new staff of this parish when the new rector comes. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

It is difficult for me to speak this next truth to you, but I know it must be spoken and it must be heard. I am aware that this sermon will be published on our parish web site and in all likelihood the priests who consider applying to be the next rector of St. Martin’s will listen to this audio file.

The truth is this: We did not welcome the Rev. Michael Bullock and his family into this parish in the manner in which we should have welcomed Christ. I am well acquainted with the start of Michael’s new ministry here eight years ago, because at that time my wife was on the search committee, and I was a member of the vestry that called him and that worked with him and the congregation for the first two years of his ministry here.

I am aware of multiple layers of reasons and circumstances that led to the breakdown of the community’s hospitality. The breakdown of hospitality in *any* family system is complex, and especially so in a family of 800 or so people. And there is one thing we need to remember as we look—not to the past, but to the future.

We must be careful to welcome the next rector of St. Martin’s with open hearts, open minds and open arms. And I know this parish is fully capable and willing to do this. There are congregations which are referred to by priests as “clergy killers.” St. Martin’s is absolutely not this type of parish. Yet, even though our DNA in the realm of hospitality is healthy, we must still exercise great care and intention as we prepare to welcome the next rector.

One important thing we can do is resist the urge to greet our next rector with a pedestal. I am convinced that parishes that elevate their clergy onto pedestals struggle terribly in the face of disappointment in, or fear of, this person who has been made to stand so tall. There is a clear and undeniable link between the pedestal upon which Jesus was placed on Palm Sunday and the Cross upon which Jesus was placed five days later on Good Friday.

¹ Matthew 10:42

Pedestals are not genuine expressions of welcome, they are projections of our own selfish needs or wants or expectations. We almost impulsively fashion pedestals for one another and for ourselves. It is one of the ways we hold up the things or people or even characteristics that we value or appreciate.

On Palm Sunday the crowds shouted, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”¹ Five days later on Good Friday, the sign on the cross read, “This is the King of the Jews.”²

As inhospitable as it might be to fashion a pedestal for the next rector—as a great pastor, or a terrific preacher, or a really gifted administrator, or a true scholar—it would be even worse to project this person onto *someone else’s* pedestal—particularly some priest in your life—past or present—who you consider to be “ideal.”

Matthew’s Gospel does not say a word about welcoming the “ideal” apostle or prophet or disciple. Rather, Matthew’s Gospel calls upon us to welcome the one who actually gets sent—imperfections and all. And by doing this, we do—in fact—welcome Christ, and *he* is the ideal, the head and cornerstone of the Church.

Exercising some modesty in our expectations, as well as with our needs and wants; while at the same time exercising generosity in our hospitality will lead us toward a welcome with open hearts, open minds and open arms. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes (the one I send), welcomes me.”

And there is no higher complement and no better way to welcome Christ than to do so with the same radical openness with which Christ welcomes us—into his household, around his table, as members of his very body, as partners in his mission, and even as friends.

Offering this kind of generous and open hospitality is one of the ways we reflect the character of God’s Kingdom in the world.

Lesslie Newbigin, in his book about the theology of mission entitled *The Open Secret* describes the Church’s mission this way: “The Church is a movement launched into the life of the world to bear in its own life God’s gift of peace for the life of the world. It is sent, therefore, not only to proclaim the kingdom but to bear in its own life the presence of the kingdom.”³

It is the season for us to prepare ourselves to receive and heartily welcome a faithful pastor, who will care for us and equip us for *our* ministries. Even now, we are being equipped in order to be sent.

And when we are sent, we can be comforted by the same assurance in today’s Gospel that may have already comforted our next rector. The assurance of Jesus is this: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Therefore, we are empowered to “go *in peace* to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

Amen.

¹ Luke 19:38

² Luke 23:38

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995, 1st edition, 1978), p. 48.