

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

June 28, 2026

Welcome!

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Scripture Reading: Matthew 10:40-42

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Strawberry Festivals

Every now and again, I’m going to share silly stories from the former churches I’ve served, and I need to say a word about that here. First of all, I have no ill thoughts about any of those former churches. They’re just full of people, and people have silly stories, and sometimes we can learn from that. But also secondly, technically you all are still one of my former churches, so who knows I might be talking about you one day!

So, at a former church a while back, we were engaged in a church-wide discussion on how to attract some new members and grow our numbers. We had session meetings, committee meetings, coffee hours, brainstorming sessions, the whole works. It was an exciting time!

Then one day, one of my elders came to visit me during the work day in my office, and said to me, “I have a new and innovative thing we can try to bring in some new members.” I thought, “I’m a big fan of new and innovative ideas! Tell me!” She said, “What if we had...a strawberry festival?”

Now, I want to be clear here church. I am in strong favor of strawberry festivals. You're telling me I get to eat strawberry shortcake on the clock at work? Sign me up! But at the same time, I don't think a Strawberry festival is either new or innovative. In fact I'm pretty sure the day after Jesus ascended to be with the Father, the new Church got together and said "What do we do now?" And Peter rose up among them and said "Let's have a strawberry festival!"

But this elder's heart was in the right place, and in fact it's a place that a lot of our hearts are in. I just spent two weeks with twenty of the sharpest pastoral minds I've ever come to know, a literal international coalition of pastors. And the number of times we brought up how frightened we are of the decline in the Church in the west was astronomical. We are afraid. Our numbers across the board are shrinking. Rare are the churches that are actually adding to their numbers rather than taking away from them. That fear can lead us to some pretty silly places, like thinking of Strawberry Festivals as the solution to all of our problems. Still, we want more people to know about Jesus, don't we? What can we do about that?

The mission of the sent ones.

This small text we read today comes with a bit of context. Jesus is sending out his disciples on their first solo mission, and in fact these disciples are being sent with a mission. Jesus says in Matthew 10:7 "*As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" I love that Jesus gives them this mission: go proclaim the good news. Don't brow beat people into the gospel. Don't make people afraid they're living wrong. Don't correct people's bad

theology. Just, tell them the good news. Then these verse we read today at the end are Jesus' pep talk to those disciples he's sending out.

Receiving a gift.

This passage is all about welcome. The word here for *welcome* in the Greek is the word *dechomai*, which can mean welcome, but also can mean "to receive, as a gift."

This is where I think a much more robust understanding of what we mean by welcome is necessary. Welcome cannot simply mean to put out coffee and snacks. Now again, let me be abundantly clear here church: I am in strong favor of coffee and snacks. If we stop doing the welcome center every Sunday, you're going to see a sharp decline in the quality of my sermons. We should of course by all means have the welcome center, and do it well. But, that by itself is not welcome. Or at least, it's not all of it.

Welcome is about encountering another, and receiving them as a gift. This morning, I'm drumming at the Bridge, so I'm thinking about the first drum set I got. It was a beautiful gift from my parents, actually a Christmas gift. I treasured that thing! It was my baby, I cleaned it every day. I took excellent care of it. In fact, some of that original drum set is what I'm still playing here today, something like 30 years later! And by the way, if you could have seen my face when I received that gift...I was like one of those home videos of the kids that can't stop jumping up and down with joy at a Christmas present. That's what it means to receive a gift well. And in fact, that's what Jesus is calling us to do here. To receive others as a gift.

The pecking order of welcome.

What follows is I think a masterful bit of teaching from Jesus, because he's going to slowly unravel the way we see the world.

To start, he says that to receive Jesus is to receive God. This is fairly self-evident, isn't it? If Jesus walked into the room, we would probably freak out like kids on Christmas. Assuming of course we recognized him...

I can imagine at this point the disciples with their notebooks and pens nodding along with Jesus. "Of course we would receive the Messiah as a gift. Of course we would receive God as a gift."

Then Jesus says that we should welcome a prophet as a prophet. Again here, I think the disciples would say "Of course we would!" A prophet is actually in a very high office. I was trying to think of what the modern equivalent would be. I used to think it was politicians, but I don't think even they get the same respect any more.

So maybe for me, the equivalent is "If Mario Lemieux walked into the sanctuary right now..." You can bet your bottom dollar I'd receive him as a gift! I'd show him the best seat, which in a Presbyterian Church is in the back. I'd get him a cup of coffee. I'd give him the full tour. I'd welcome him!

This is how folks would have treated a prophet in Jesus' day. Who exactly it is that counts as a prophet today is a bit harder to sort out than it would have been back then, but still. We get this level of welcome too.

Then Jesus says we should welcome a righteous person as a righteous person. This isn't an official office, but still! We're already willing to receive "good" people. If someone looks like us, behaves like us, strikes us as a "good" person, well of course we want them to join us and be welcomed, right?

But this gets a little bit tricky. How do we know who's righteous?

Maybe it's that they follow the right religion? But surely, it can't be that only Presbyterians are the righteous ones, right? I know it's General Assembly week, so that borders on blasphemy. But still...I'm betting that Methodists can be righteous. I'm betting Baptists can be righteous. I'm betting that Jews can be good people. I'm even bettering that Atheists can behave themselves. Where are we going to draw the line here?

Perhaps it'd be better if we defined righteousness as the right behaviors? I mean, obviously, if you murder someone, that's not righteous behavior, right? Unless of course that person intended to do harm to others. Stealing something isn't righteous behavior, is it? Unless of course it's to feed your starving family. If you dress like us, you must be on the good list, right? Unless of course you dress like a punk rocker and have a heart of gold.

Oh my...this is getting tricky!

Though perhaps our world today would tell us that righteousness comes down to the right politics. It sure is where the culture seems to be at the moment. A study out of Stanford University recently showed that political affiliation is now more likely to be a dividing trait than either race or religion. Think for a moment about how much race and religion have divided us throughout American history, and now they're in second place.

But we can't possibly think, I mean we can't possibly think can we that only Republicans are the righteous ones? Or that Democrats are the only righteous ones? This is getting tricky, because it puts us in a place where we might be asked to receive someone as a gift that the rest of the world is swearing up and down is our enemy. But if they're there to proclaim the good news to us, shouldn't we listen to them?

Indeed this is tricky...but don't worry, it gets worse.

Jesus then says "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you none of these will lose their reward." When Jesus uses this phrase "little ones" in Greek, it's a mannerism that means "the lowly ones." Who would this be in our world today? The homeless? The poor? The immigrant? The afraid? The lonely?

One of my favorite theologians happens to be a rockstar by the name of Jon Foreman of the band Switchfoot. I think he hit the nail on the head when he referred to this group that Jesus is talking about as "lowercase people." These are the ones that are easy to ignore. The ones who are easy to pass by. The ones that no one wants to help out. But, even they could be disciples Jesus says, and those disciples are carriers of the good news.

I wouldn't want to miss out on that, would you? In fact, I don't know about you, but with the state of the world, I don't want to miss a single drop of good news that could be coming my way. I want to hear the good news of what God is doing in this world. And what Jesus seems to be saying here is that we ought to pay attention, because that good news could be coming from some rather surprising places. Jesus is inviting us to receive these folks as a gift, and we're called to welcome them.

Take Care

Jesus says that this kind of welcome is defined by giving these lowercase people a glass of cold water. A while back, I was doing a bike adventure, and it was one of those scorching hot days. I had brought two bottles of water with me, and at this point they were bone dry, and we still had something like twelve miles to go. I was dying!

As we finished climbing this hill, there was, without any rationale or explanation, a pair of German folks sitting in the back of a pickup truck with gallons of water. And not only that, but they had kept the water in ice in coolers, so it was ice cold. Do you have any idea what it feels like to have that cup of cold water hit your lips when you are completely parched? Oh...it was like heaven! I think I floated the last twelve miles of that ride. *That's* what welcome is, what true welcome is.

So I'm still thinking about that first drum set, about what it means to take care of your gifts. It means taking the time to care for it. It means making an extra effort to make sure you don't damage it. It means performing maintenance and keeping it in working order. So, if welcoming the disciples is like receiving a gift, and just about anyone can be that gift for us, what is it exactly that Jesus is calling us to do?

Assume a bigger posture of welcome.

While I was in Scotland, I had the pleasure of visiting St. Giles Cathedral. Actually, I visited there lots of times, but I had three distinct variations of welcome there, each of which left a mark on me.

The first visit was the first Sunday I was there, when I went to worship at St. Giles. I had been there once the year before, and back then had picked a horrible seat where I couldn't see anything, so this time I went nice and early and picked out a good seat right up front. Except that on this particular Sunday,

there was a celebration for the Edinburgh town council, and I was apparently sitting in the seat reserved for the Lord Provost. A delightfully charming usher came and told me that, and I asked him if there was any way I could run for that office before worship started so that I could keep my chair. He didn't think I was very funny...instead he showed me to a new seat. This is one level of welcome, right? I was allowed in, I was invited to participate, but it was on their terms, and under their conditions.

The second kind of visit was the few times that I visited as a tourist. We went on a tour as part of the class, and we walked around and saw all the artifacts in that space. The key phrase for this level of welcome was "DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING!" This was of course one of the least welcoming of the visits. I was in the door, but in no way shape or form was I made to feel like I belonged in there. In fact, I felt more like I was a nuisance to those who were trying to work.

The third time though, that was different. The current pastor at St. Giles had actually gone through the program I'm doing now, and so he arranged for us to join him for coffee and conversation. He led us downstairs, away from the touristy areas into the cathedral's inner working areas. We had behind the scenes access. We were conversation partners. We spent an hour or so talking about what it meant to be pastors in a larger church, something I was suddenly uniquely interested in. Here, my needs were met with coffee. My curiosities were peaked by the conversation. I was rightly and truly welcomed that third time, right?

Which of these kinds of experiences do you think are what our visitors here experience? Legitimately, I don't know, there's no hidden agenda behind that question other than honest reflection. But it is to say that welcome is about much more than just opening the doors, and allowing someone to come in and have a seat in a pew. It's about more than making sure no visitors are sitting in our seat, even if we think we're as

important as the Lord Provost. It's about giving folks a sense of belonging, of meeting their needs, of peaking their curiosity, of engaging with them. It's about receiving them as a gift.

Actually, this is one of our big four values, isn't it? Our priorities are listed on our website and in a bunch of other places here. Priority one for us here at Westminster is to "Accept everyone with love." Or maybe, to put it another way, our priority is to receive everyone as a gift. However, that word "everyone" can really trip us up, so...

Pay attention to lowercase people.

One of my favorite experiences was a few years ago when I got to ride in an event called RAGBRAI- The Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa. Every year, something like 20,000-30,000 people ride it. That means that there was never a moment where I saw an open patch of road without cyclists on it. But what I really loved about RAGBRAI was how often I would see someone on the side of the road with a flat tire, surrounded by 5-10 strangers, who were helping them to fix a flat tire or other mechanical issue to keep moving. I even got to help someone fix a flat at one point on the ride. And it would have been just so easy to keep going, right? I don't have a flat tire, so I'm good! But on a ride like that, you look after each other.

In our world, it would be so easy to pay zero attention to the lowercase people. We don't have their lives. We took care of ourselves. We climbed the social ladder. We put in our time. Why on earth would we help them?

Well, because Jesus told us that's the call. The call is to look out for the lowercase people. Not just when they happen across our path, either. We're supposed to be seeking them out to make sure that we can give them a cup of water. Or change their tire. Or fight for their rights. Or advocate for

them. Or just tell them that we love them. The call is to find the lowercase people, and welcome them. We are to receive them as a gift.

Take care of your gifts.

We have been blessed beyond measure here. We have resources that others could only dream of. If these lowercase people are going to be our gifts, then we ought to make sure we use our resources to take care of our gifts. We ought to make sure that those of us who have more than enough give to those who are just scraping by. We ought to make sure that no one in our reach ever has to go to bed hungry. We ought to make sure that the lowercase people have cups of water to spare. We ought to make sure that the division of our culture doesn't have the last word, or really any word at all. We ought to make sure that we receive those folks as a gift, and in turn receive the gift they have for us. Jesus tells us that when we welcome one of these little ones, the lowercase people, we're welcoming them as a disciple. And that means they have some good news to share with us.

May you...

And so, may you welcome everyone, the prophet, the righteous, and the lowercase people. May you receive them as gifts in your life, even when the whole world is telling you they're your enemy. May you take care of your gifts, offering them the cup of water that they so desperately need. And may you through it all hear what they have to say to us: the Good News, the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



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