

The Rewards

Matthew 10:40-42

A theologian at Yale Divinity School, the Irish liturgical theologian Siobhán Garrigan, tells a story from her travels around Ireland researching her book *The Real Peace Process*. Arriving at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, Siobhán was pleased to be greeted at the door by two women, church members, who seemed to invite her into conversation. Siobhán realized that these women were ushers of some sort, whose job it was to stand at the door of the church and interview newcomers as they arrived. They quietly asked her name and the first names of any other approaching strangers who wished to join in the morning worship.

Then Siobhán figured out what was happening. Hearing those names, the ushers would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and the Catherines and the Patricks, were told that they were surely in the wrong church and sent on their way. We assumed that Siobhán must be referring to research done decades ago; surely no church would act in this way any longer. Our hopes are quickly dashed. This remains the current practice, Siobhán writes.

This is a story foreign to North Americans like us, we reason, because it is about a faraway congregation of Irish Presbyterians, who are nothing like us at all, still fighting their Protestant-Catholic battles. Luckily we have no such issues. Our society has moved past such discriminatory behavior. We have elected an African American president, after all, and knocked down all of the walls and boundaries. In our worshipping communities, everyone is welcome.

Confronted with the unsettling image of that Protestant church on an Irish hillside, we want immediately to dismiss such boundary keeping as abhorrent to the gospel. Perhaps, however, it is more familiar than we want to admit; a barring of the door may not be as unknown to us as we like to pretend. Our church would never ask the name of a stranger in some covert attempt to find them out and send them off to where they belong.

Nevertheless, we have to confess that, though we define our borders differently, we define them still—and more subtly. Often our borders are about education or profession, neighborhood lived in or club memberships or schools that the children attend, social or economic status or political perspective, or sexual identity or family model or bank accounts.

Jesus addresses the issue in the most personal of terms. He describes the love that families hold for one another, the tenderness with which we care for parents and for children. That tenderness and compassion must be our model for loving all who come into our lives, in Christ's name. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome none other than the Christ. The ushers at the door of that Irish Presbyterian church behave as they do because they have been informed by a culture of distrust. Their desire to bar the door is born of the hope for security in their lives and in their tiny parish. We are more like them than we care to admit.

William Goettler

In just a few short sentences of power and compassion, we are challenged to think more deeply about what is meant by welcoming one another. It is only after doing so that we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us. In our reading, our focus is on compassionate welcome or hospitality as a form of service to Christ. We realize that this welcome can and should be performed by us at any time and is not confined to large heroic acts by those eligible for sainthood. The simple, basic acts of kindness we perform in

genuine welcome of one another are all that God asks of us. We must look around us to see who is in need and then do something about it.

Christian faith advocates compassionate welcome that encourages us to trust, to be open, to share, to steer clear of manipulating others, and to live a way of life that is beyond personal gain. We are also to be realistic about those things that distort and prevent us from the compassion described in Matthew. Indeed, the elements of our compassionate welcome are found in the contradiction of our lives when human relationships of closeness, warmth, depth, and durability are also tinged with our alienation from each other.

Our will to achieve caring relationships is within our grasp, yet all too often, if left to our devices, we fall short of creating and nurturing the genuine relationships in which we develop into the people God calls us to be. Pride, ego, self-doubt, and their kin keep us from connecting with each other except in self-interested ways. Therefore we need God's embrace in our lives to live in this inconsistency and fulfill our faith, living in compassionate welcome with one another and extending genuine hospitality. In these four short verses, Jesus helps us steer away from distorting others and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, and unjustified hopes.

Compassionate welcome means approaching each other through God. This is how we recognize that genuine human relationships emerge from putting the grace-filled hospitality of God's love at the center of our lives and at the center of all our relationships. God's hospitality teaches us that close, loving, enduring relationships are to be valued along with distant, occasional, and abrasive ones—as difficult as the latter ones may be. This lively, and sometimes maddening, dynamic is the welcome Jesus speaks of in our passage. If we live into this welcome with each other, we will find the rich rewards of discipleship found in God.

How might we transcend orientations that make us participants in oppression? How might we become more sympathetic to and supportive of the efforts of oppressed people to accomplish social reforms—so that even a diaconate's greeting or a pastoral handshake becomes the *beginning* of radically changing our worlds to be more in line with God's realm?

One response from our heightened awareness we receive through our scripture is to realize that we must practice not only hospitality but also repentance. Turning from our familiar behavior patterns that do not welcome others, we turn toward acts that signal our willingness to embrace and live the new ways of being found in God. In repentance, our positions of privilege are debunked, and our old ways of being "at home" are acknowledged as being morally bankrupt.

Jesus says to us, "Take your love for family, that love for your closest community, and extend it, extend it further and further still. Welcome in the stranger. Welcome in the one whose life you hardly understand. Not to change them, but simply because they too are God's." **William Goettler**

Although Jesus speaks of rewards in this passage, we should not offer compassionate welcome with the expectation that something will be returned to us. Love is not always met with love. Jesus was clear with his disciples that being his followers would be difficult at times and that we will suffer persecution. Sometimes love is met with crucifixion; yet we are called to love in the midst of hate—even in those times where it appears that hatred has won.

Compassion, then, grounds itself in a double absurdity of love where love can lead to tribulation, which then leads us to greater love. With this in mind, we must remember that God's grace continues to act in and through the most hateful situations and that crucifixion is followed by resurrection. With compassionate welcome, Jesus calls us to put our love in jeopardy so that its blessings are made

manifest in our lives and in the lives of others. We become the embodiment of Christian compassionate welcome that leads to hospitality in God's spirit of mercy.

The hospitality rooted in compassionate welcome is both a practice and a spiritual discipline in which we discover that by offering hospitality we may be welcoming something or someone new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives. This requires us to recognize another's gifts and vulnerabilities, the need for shelter and sustenance, and encourages us to open up our worldviews and perspectives as well as our hearts and souls.

As we extend hospitality to others, we may well find that we experience new insights and hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions. Such witness can stimulate our souls and spiritual imaginations so that we become new beings.

Emilie M. Townes

Jesus insists that although we might pretend otherwise, we are not the gatekeepers of the community of God. We can bear that job no longer. Our work is to welcome, to offer an embrace when embrace is invited, and to give a cup of cool water for a hot summer day. Our reward, Jesus says, will be full indeed. **William Goettler** This is the reward we will not lose. This is the reward of the kingdom of God!

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