

Welcome Without Boundaries

Mark 9:30-37 James 3:13 – 4:3, 7 – 8a

September 20, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Mark 9:30-37 *They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." ³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. ³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

James 3:13 - 4:3 ¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

4:1 *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*

4:7-8 ⁷ *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

Our social lives are organized around so many routines and conventions that we often find ourselves running on auto-pilot. Shaking hands is nearly an instinct; greeting one another with, "How are you?" is nearly a nerve-fired impulse much like breathing or blinking.

These are such well-practiced liturgies that we find ourselves nonplussed when someone takes the question to heart and gives us a detailed statement on how they really are. Maxwell Perkins – famed editor of such literary luminaries as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe – was convinced that no one really listened to what anyone else says on such occasions. He told the story of arriving late to a cocktail party one evening and greeting his hostess with a warm handshake and the comment, "So sorry I'm late, but it took me

longer to strangle my aunt than I expected.” “O, yes, indeed,” his hostess said; “I’m so happy you came.”

Jesus, I suspect, wondered if his disciples ever really listened to him, as well, or were they as dumb as posts as the Gospels sometimes seem to suggest. He says some seriously provocative things as he and his entourage walk about Galilee – at least as startling as Perkins strangling his aunt – about being handed over to those who would kill him, and after death, resurrection – and the disciples’ collective response was along the lines of, “Oh, that’s nice; enjoy yourself and be sure and let us know how it all comes out.”

As for Jesus listening to the disciples, he asked them what they had been talking about, but they had nothing to say about that, not wanting to admit that his teaching on the last being first and the first last had definitely been wasted on them, for they had been talking about which of them was the golden boy, the favorite, the best, brightest, and most-likely-to-succeed disciple.

They, like most of us, heard what they wanted to hear and discarded what they wanted to forget. Listening inevitably engenders change in a person, and they were satisfied with where they were spiritually, thank you very much. At this stage in their growing toward Jesus, they were quite the conventional group – conventional in their attitudes and understanding, conventional in their ambitions and plans, and conventional in their inability to think outside their social situation.

And then Jesus stages that little scene with the child. Now, in some ways Jesus’ words and actions seem out of context. Jesus has just been talking of betrayal and death and servanthood – all of which are matters that can easily rattle most adults. And into the midst of his little crowd of disciples – and into the midst of all this talk of really serious stuff that we might not even talk about in front of our children – Jesus brings a child as an example of something that must have seemed to the disciples to be a very strange point, indeed.

Many of you are no doubt familiar with this passage of scripture, but what you heard read earlier was probably not the version you learned. Likely what you learned was from the King James or Revised Standard versions of scripture. What Jesus says in those older translations is, “Whoever *receives* one such child in my name *receives* me; and whoever *receives* me, *receives* not me but him who sent me.” What we read today was from the New Revised Standard Version: “Whoever *welcomes* one such child in my name *welcomes* me, and whoever *welcomes* me *welcomes* not me but the one who sent me.”

Formerly, we *receive*; now, we *welcome*. Is it a distinction without a difference? It’s the same Greek word being translated. For those who are grammatically inclined, the word is a subjunctive aorist middle deponent 3rd person singular of *dechomai*, which means *to show hospitality, to welcome, entertain, receive, accept, take, grasp, take a favorable attitude toward, approve, or accept*. Given all these choices facing the biblical translation teams, the old-timers chose *receive*, and the more recent folks chose *welcome*, and I want to suggest there’s a big, big difference between the two; that both have problems, though, and what is important about any word is not ultimately what synonym we choose, or how we pronounce it, but what effective follow-through we muster after saying it.

You remember the story of the man who was known all around town as a great supporter of the local schools and of activities for youth. He gave lots of money to enrichment programs for kids, helped build playgrounds, set up health fairs and clinics for children from poor families. Therefore, the neighbors were greatly surprised one day to see him chasing some kids down the street with a stick after they had carved their initials in his freshly-laid cement sidewalk. "John," the neighbors said, "we're astonished to see you doing this; we thought you liked kids." "I do," he said, "but in the abstract, not in the concrete!"

Just as there's a big, big difference between "Thanks!" and "Much obliged!" I think there's a big, big difference between the passive, self-referential *receive* and the active, other-focused *welcome*. One stands by and waits; the other goes forth and embraces. One answers after hearing the knock on the door; the other runs down the road rejoicing that the prodigal has come home. *Receiving* is the posture of the Pope, the Queen, or someone opening junk mail. *Welcoming* is the eager anticipation, the energetic preparation for, and the embracing of an honored guest.

Welcome is a wholehearted response to another based on an understanding of belonging. *Receive* is impersonal and does not depend on an ongoing relationship at all. We confuse the two as we think through – or fail to think through – the implications of what it means to be disciples of Jesus. Do you remember a few years ago when Californians, seeking to escape the congestion of Los Angeles and other quality of life issues in the state began moving to Oregon thereby threatening to create congestion there? One Oregon state senator proposed erecting billboards at the borders saying, "You are welcome to visit Oregon, but please don't stay."

As a people we seem to grasp what it means to be welcoming at the micro, interpersonal levels of life. We are certainly welcoming here at church, and strive to make our homes welcoming, and our family and social relationships welcoming. It's at the macro social levels that welcome becomes such a challenge for us we quickly revert to *receive*, at best.

There is a great number of significant national issues where a deeper understanding of Christ's welcome could differently shape our thinking and acting. When we consider the issue of immigration, welcome becomes a casualty. Challenged to consider the vulnerable and needy in our midst, we become wary, anxious, and reticent. As persons of faith, we are called to think theologically about our relationship to others, but the call of nativism and the fear of the stranger speak more loudly. We are person called by God to think outside the usual economic, ideological categories, but it remains easy for us to conclude that it is a threat, not a neighbor, at our gate; it is someone to fear, not welcome.

When we think of the health care crisis and the millions uninsured and unemployed, do we as Christians consider how the theology of welcome might inform our views? Welcome puts the needs of others first; welcome is concerned with well-being. Welcome implies care for the vulnerable, the ill, the young and the old, and the stranger. Welcome is sharing.

We are practiced in thinking of our relationship to one another in economic, individualistic terms. There we grudgingly *receive* if we can afford to,

if it doesn't impact on us, if the relationship we are contemplating is brief, passing, and impersonal.

But *welcome* is the theological frame within which we are challenged to understand our relationship to Jesus, and we can't think about our relationship to Jesus without confronting our relationship to the other, the stranger, the broader community. He placed a child in their midst – an example of vulnerability, weakness, and need – and he intimately connected the disciples' response to that need to their response to God. The Christ in whose name we are baptized at the font and who is host at the table and who calls us his friends is the same who asked, "Do you love me?" and said, "Feed my sheep...." He is the one who fed the multitude, healed the sick, blessed the stranger, and preached the kingdom of God. It is that kingdom – not our neighborhood, not our nationality, not our color, creed, or preferences – that we are to work for.

Now, we all know there are no easy answers to complex questions of social policy. But we'll never get the right answers if we're asking the wrong questions, and we'll never understand Jesus' call if we welcome only those who are easy for us to welcome but exclude those for who are hard for us to welcome. For us who have been addressed as friends of Jesus, brothers and sisters in his family, it just won't do to act in the macro social realm as though we bear no responsibility, as though it's everyone for himself, as though we are the only ones included in his welcome, as though when welcome is costly, we no longer need to remember Christ's call. In our James reading today we heard, "...The wisdom from above is... pure... peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." Our call is to magnanimity and the intimate taking into our arms, hearts, and heads the needs of others. The welcome of Christ is not an abstraction; it is the practical ethic of the Christian life. Welcome is not merely the character of our relationship to Jesus, but to one another. It is not merely a pleasant convention in our interpersonal relationships, it is the mandate of Kingdom citizenship. We are not called to love in principle but, indeed, in the concrete. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." It is Christ's own blessing that he gives his welcome to all.