

Imagination, Curiosity, Abundance, Vulnerability

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September 19, 2021. How can we use our imagination, caring curiosity, abundant generosity, and vulnerability to welcome more intentionally?

Readings: [James 3: 13-4:3, 7-8a](#), [Mark 9: 30-37](#)

*** Transcript ***

The hard conversations continue again this week. Jesus reminds his disciples that there are difficult times ahead — rejection and even death, and not glory, are in store for the one who they hope will free them from oppressive Roman rule. And the disciples still don't get it. Perhaps they don't really want to understand. And who can blame them? This time, rather than arguing with Jesus about this as we heard last week, the disciples get into a conversation of their own, trying to work out among them who will have the biggest share of the glory that they are sure still is going to come, when Jesus seizes power.

They are embarrassed to tell Jesus that this is what they'd been talking about. But Jesus knows anyway, and he calls them to focus on what is more important: welcoming those who are commonly overlooked and rejected to the table. Making sure that those usually left behind get the seats closest to Jesus. He shifts the conversation to radical welcome. And this got me thinking about welcome, what it means and how we live it out, and one of the places where I have experienced profound welcome.

When we arrived in Tanzania, on one hand everything felt different. Mostly dirt roads, food that was unfamiliar to me, unknown language, and most of all, the monkeys that were playing in the trees where we were used to seeing squirrels. It didn't take long, however, before we knew that we were thoroughly welcomed there.

Our hosts met us, with face-splitting smiles and bear hugs, even though, we found out later, one of them had malaria when we arrived. They walked us to the hotel, where our rooms were ready for us. Everywhere we went, there was food and drink offered. Even those who seemed to have nothing had what they could give to us, and they gave it freely — whether that be peanuts, or little cakes or tea. And there was always the opportunity to wash our hands... echoing the tradition in Jesus's time of washing the dust and dirt of long travel off the feet of every visitor who entered your house.

We went to worship, and every word of Swahili was translated for us by one of our hosts, who intently wrote a couple of sentences at a time on small sheets of paper that she sent down our row so we could all read what was being said. And behind, around, and through it all, our first and most frequent Swahili words, as I mentioned earlier: Karibu sana! Not simply welcome, but close. And not just close, but very close.

“All are welcome” is something that we say a lot, isn't it? And yet, it's so easy to get caught in our own “stuff” and fail to welcome well. Sometimes we're stuck in the feeling that there isn't enough to share with someone else. Like the disciples, we may find ourselves arguing over where we sit, rather than looking to make sure everyone has a place.

We may be stuck in “old ways” of doing things, thinking that the way we have always done things is the only way. As James points out today, the desires or cravings in our hearts can distract us, and get us lost in what's in it for us. Soon we are arguing, as the disciples did, over who gets recognition, the best

seat, the most power, and we have completely forgotten the God of abundance who has made sure there is enough for everyone.

Jesus understands where the disciples have gotten lost, and shifts the conversation to radical welcome. And as so often happens, Jesus lifts up those who are overlooked as he describes how to live out the call of God in our lives. This time, it's not a Samaritan, or a woman, but a child. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Whoever welcomes the forgotten one, the last one, welcomes God.

Debie Thomas, in her blog "Journey With Jesus," turns this around a little bit, and reflects not on how children are welcomed, but on how children can show us how to welcome. Children use their imaginations, Thomas points out. The disciples struggled to break out of their hierarchical thinking, but children have a great capacity to see things from different angles.

Anyone who has spent time with children knows that unlike the disciples who were afraid to ask Jesus about what they didn't understand, children are not afraid to ask the hard questions, sometimes to our great embarrassment, as when my younger brother chose the quietest moment of worship to loudly ask, "Why that man ain't got no hair?!"

The disciples, and many of us adults, don't easily trust in abundance, but children often tend by nature to trust that there is enough, that they are enough, and that they will have what they need. Children often have to be taught to fear not having enough.

And from children we can learn that, contrary to what we might expect, God shows up best in vulnerability. Jesus shows us this truth over and over throughout his ministry, all the way to the cross. Thomas writes, "Do we want to see God? Do we really want to see God? Then look to the child abandoned in the alleyway. Look to the child detained at our border. Look to the child who has been abused. Look to the child who is fleeing from war. Look to the least of these, and see the face of God." Imagination, honest curiosity, abundant generosity, vulnerability. This is the welcome we are called to.

Last Sunday, you all gave approval for the Council to receive a bid on the Mead Center, and to move forward with conversation about renovation plans for our church building. Welcome and accessibility are clear, core values that have been named in the process of renovation, and this came up again in our conversations over the last couple of months.

When Sunday School space was discussed recently, Superintendent Mr. Jesse said that if we wait until someone comes who needs an elevator, it is already too late to make that person welcome. It's already too late. We are invited, in reflecting on this, to welcome not just those who are already here, but to use our imaginations so that we can be prepared to welcome those who will come in the future.

And in the not too far future, we know that Afghani people fleeing their homes as refugees will be coming to St. Louis, and with the coordination and guidance of the International Institute of St. Louis, St. Louis is already preparing to welcome them. The Afghani people will come bringing their culture, bringing their faith, their families, their losses and their griefs, their hopes and their dreams. It will take all of us St. Louisans to open the door and make way for them to have their homes among us. And we, as Christ Lutheran Church, have already been involved in helping to prepare for those who will be coming to join our communities.

So I ask all of us, myself included... how do people know that they are welcome here, in our

community of faith? How do people know that they are welcome in our schools and our workplaces, in our homes, and in our lives? How can we use our imagination, caring curiosity, abundant generosity, and vulnerability to welcome more intentionally? And how can we open our hearts to the Spirit and unleash our capacity to welcome and serve, not just today, but for many years to come? Come, Holy Spirit, and guide us into the future.

Thanks be to God.

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