

"Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me."

July 2, 2017

The Rev. Lisa Smith Fry

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Welcoming people is a part of our religious heritage since our earliest Hebrew days in the desert. Being welcomed, or NOT being welcomed, often meant the difference between life and death in an inhospitable time.

St. Thomas' has some unique ways of offering a hearty New England welcome. Our sanctuary doors are open whenever we are onsite—ensuring that our peaceful, God filled sanctuary is open to all to enter, rest and pray. Our bulletins are cutting edge (ask me about that after the service), we offer restroom hospitality during the week to traveling pilgrims—I mean summer tourists--- who need a respite--and you are some of the most welcoming people I have ever seen.

And I have seen some pretty unwelcoming parishes.

When my daughter was 3, my family had just moved back to northern Kentucky to live, and we were-- for the moment-- not actually working in the church. We decided to visit smallish parishes around where we lived-- figuring that small parishes would be homey, and friendly, and welcome a young family. We were wrong. The first 4 parishes had decent liturgies, and the sermons were all right. But the really awful thing was that no one spoke to us before or after the service. No one. I don't remember any smiles either.

Churches are supposed to be all about good news-- and we follow Jesus, who never met a stranger he didn't welcome, so being in a house of God – which purported to follow this "stranger welcomer"--and not being made to feel welcomed-- not only was discouraging, but made me wonder why they were so fearful of newcomers? I mean, what were they protecting? Their way of doing things? And if that was so—how could one small family upset the status quo?

Then I remembered a small family from Nazareth who upset the status quo on more than one occasion.

But hey—we weren't Jesus, either.

Weary of looking, I decided I needed some good church music, so I suggested we go across the river to the Cathedral in Cincinnati. I'd heard big churches were impersonal,

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but my soul needed feeding. So we bundled up our 3 year old and decided to go. Just once. For the music. As always, we traveled incognito. No clerical clothes.

At least 10 people in the pews around us asked us our names and introduced themselves. Each one asked us if they could show us where coffee hour was. Every clergy person talked to us. One young priest even picked up Zoe so that Zoe could help her "greet" parishioners. They called us during the next week. We had found our church.

Welcoming is important. What we do here-- especially what you do--- is so important to our common life as followers of the one who welcomed everyone.

So I want to get the word out there about what a welcoming place we are. How we open our doors-- and our hearts-- to strangers.

How would **we** like to be welcomed into a group? As a warm body? As someone who might be useful? As someone who might help the budget? Those ways of being welcomed certainly fill me with warm fuzziness (not), but I think I'd rather be welcomed as Lisa, unique child of God. How about you?

Whoever welcomes a prophet, will receive a prophets reward.

Whoever welcomes a righteous person, will receive the reward of the righteous...

Whoever gives a cup of water to one of these little ones—truly I tell you – none of these will lose their reward.

The “little ones” Jesus is referring to are not children, incidentally. He’s talking about people in society—who he’s sending the disciples out to – these are the people who are seen as having little worth- those on the fringes of society. The Native Americans have a good word for those people: Anawim: voiceless ones. We’re called to offer a cup of living water to everyone- even the marginalized.

We never know when God will send a prophet to us here at St. Thomas’. We need to be ready. We never know when God will send a righteous person—a person filled with justice and mercy. We will need to be alert. And we never know when God will send the little ones—the anawim, the voiceless ones to us—we need to be prepared.

It’s very important for people to feel accepted exactly as they are. After all, God accepts us just as we are. Sometimes WE don’t accept ourselves that way—but God knows each

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of us through and through—even the parts of ourselves that we don’t always tell people about. God knows every part of us. And God loves us, accepts us, and welcomes us into his presence—knowing that we are more amazing than we think we are.

I think that many times we see someone we don’t know—really don’t know anything about—and we think—I don’t know them. They are a stranger. But Jesus tells us that our welcome must extend to all. Why?:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Let us continue to generously welcome people into our church, into our hearts and into our lives. For in doing so, we welcome Jesus. Amen.