

The Rev. Renee L. Fenner  
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Year A/Proper 8  
July 2, 2017  
Text: Matthew 10:40-42

“Welcome”

“I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the House of the Lord.”

“Good morning and welcome to St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church!” It has been a few years since we started this practice of having a designated person greet you at the start of the liturgy. If you recall it is a practice that began when we were really rallying around the effort to bring new folks into the fold. A few have come and stayed, thanks be to God. Still I'll bet some of you then and perhaps now might think it odd that we still welcome each other in this way Sunday after Sunday especially when some of us have been around quite a while.

There are many Episcopal Churches and congregations of various denominations that think of themselves as welcoming communities. We all love to think of ourselves as welcoming and *the* place to be on Sunday mornings. At the bare minimum there is at least one usher who stands at the door to hand out bulletins. There may be a sign that tells you where the sanctuary and the bathrooms are. There might even be one person who will go out of their way to introduce him or herself but not always. A newcomer will know right away if he or she is welcomed or not. Trust me. I know. There is nothing more pitiful than going into a house of worship and there is no one to greet you or a congregation that will give you an icy stare and dare you to sit in their seat or worse-a congregation that totally ignores you.

But back to St. Barnabas. We say that we are (*St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church is*) *a welcoming, energized, loving, multi-cultural parish serving North St. Louis County and many surrounding areas. Worship style is traditional but the congregation is informal. Come join us in worshipping our Lord and Savior.*

We do our best in living into our statement of hospitality and welcome. We do a pretty good job of it but lest we become too comfortable-

our gospel lesson for this morning reminds us that we ought not to rest on our laurels or think we have it all down pat.

In today's gospel, Jesus makes it clear that there is a mystical and divine connection between him and us and God. "Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." And so when we welcome a stranger, a sister or brother, we welcome the Christ.

Matthew points this out later in the gospel, (in chapter 25, verses 34-36) in the parable of the final judgement in which Jesus makes it clear that when we feed someone who is hungry, we are actually feeding him. When we give water to someone who is thirsty, we are giving that water to him. When we give someone something to wear, we are clothing him. When we visit someone in prison, we are visiting him. When we welcome the stranger, we are actually welcoming him.

It is plain to see that Jesus is saying that he the Christ is in each one of us. Christ is in you and in me. Christ is in the person sitting near or next to you in the pew. Christ is in the stranger you will meet at Schnuck's or in Lowe's. In the child riding their bicycle in your neighborhood. The vendor taking orders on the food truck. The neighbor whose dog barks at all times of day and night. We encounter Christ in everyone we meet. We encounter the holy, the divine in each person. We don't need to look up into the heavens and imagine a heavenly being but look, really look into the eyes of each individual we encounter here on earth.

This isn't always easy. In fact, it may seem impossible. The Christ within another person isn't always obvious. Especially when that person does something we don't like, like swerving in front of us from the left lane in order to make that immediate exit in the far right lane. It isn't always obvious when the person in the checkout line directly ahead of you is too busy speaking on their cell phone instead of emptying their shopping cart. It isn't always obvious when someone is "different" in some way or acts in a way we don't agree with or holds different beliefs than our own.

It isn't always easy to welcome someone into "our space" whether it is here or in our own personal lives. But when we begin to see the Christ in others, when we care enough to welcome him into our lives, there is the possibility of change for the better.

There is a story about a monastery.

*A monastery had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.*

*In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.*

*The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could say, "I know how it is". "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"*

*"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."*

*When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?"*

*"The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant?"*

*In the time that followed, the old monks wondered whether the significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?*

*Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.*

*Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.*

*Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I?*

*As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.*

*People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.*

*Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.\**

In everything we seek to do as a church community here at St. B's, it isn't a matter of patting ourselves on the back for doing what the gospel mandates. In everything we do, it is to the honor and glory of God. We encounter God, by welcoming the other. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Being a family that welcomes, really welcomes, will transform us just like the monastery in the story. And that transformation will allow us to be

open to a greater good and to new possibilities and new relationships. So that there are never insiders and outsiders in this place of worship. So that our welcome goes beyond teaching others which book to use or when to sit or to stand. So that we are able to recognize the Christ within each other and the Christ who comes into our midst and the Christ we will encounter along the way. So that the welcoming love of God is known throughout the world.

Amen.

\*author unknown