

Pentecost 4 (8A)
Trinity Parish Seattle
July 2, 2017

[Jeremiah 28:5-9](#)

[Psalm 89:1-4,15-18](#)

[Romans 6:12-23](#)

[Matthew 10:40-42](#)

In our gospel reading today (just three very short verses from the tenth chapter of Matthew) we hear one word used six times. I dare say, it must be important. And it is the word “welcome.”

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous..."

Jesus' disciples apparently had some anxiety about how they would be received when they went out in his name to teach and to heal and to proclaim the coming of God's reign. And these words were meant to encourage them as well as those to whom they went. And their message is that the one who welcomes another is truly blessed, because they welcome not only the one they see before them, but they welcome Christ as well.

I think I have learned most of what I know about welcome and hospitality in some of the poorest places on earth. Whether it was a little girl sitting beside me at a nursery school in El Salvador offering me her sandwich when she saw I had not brought my lunch, or the many places throughout Africa where I have been welcomed into people's homes: in a Nairobi slum; into the manyatta of a Maasai matriarch; into the homes of Sudanese refugees; the homes of young widows in Goma, Congo; or a genocide survivor in Rwanda.

Perhaps the most important word in Swahili is “Karibu!” How many times have I heard that word in Kenya and throughout east Africa? -- what an important word it is! Welcome! You are welcome here! Just hearing that word now makes me feel so good – so included and embraced.

I must say that in spite of the warm welcome, I have often felt overwhelmed in situations like those I described. Haunting questions, like, “What good can I possibly do in this situation?!” or, “How is my presence here making one bit of difference?!” seem to just hang in the air.

Jesus had an answer to that question. He said to the disciples: “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Something as simple as a cup of cold water. Sometimes that is the most pressing need that a person or a community has – and if you live out under the hot sun in a dry place, a cup of cold water might be the most precious thing you can imagine. And while we might easily take our clean, fresh, cold water for granted here in Seattle, not everyone can. There are millions of people around the world who do not have access to clean, drinkable water. And that is true not only in Africa, but in poor communities across this country – think Flint, Michigan, or towns throughout Appalachia where mining practices have destroyed streams and rivers and lakes. What more basic need do we have than our need for water?

When a church or an NGO provides a well or a borehole for a community in the developing world, not only is it providing safe drinking water, which helps to eliminate disease and enable healthier lives and communities; it also liberates young girls and women in a community who otherwise may never be able to attend school because they are the ones who carry water from long distances to their homes and communities.

To provide a cup of water to someone who does not have it is an act of mercy. Providing access to clean, drinkable water, may be the key to a healthier life and also lead toward gender justice and equal access to education.

Over 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah said, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) We often think of justice and mercy as being two separate kinds of things: mercy is direct action to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the cup of water to those who are thirsty. Doing justice is working through a legal and political process for social and economic justice to change the conditions in which people live their lives. Mercy is giving someone a fish. Justice is dealing with the systemic causes of hunger and teaching someone to fish. We sometimes even pit mercy and justice against each other. Some say that ministries of mercy ignore the systemic causes of poverty and thereby help to perpetuate them. Others will say that marching in the streets or working through a long process for justice does nothing to solve the immediate needs of people.

But it is not either/or. It’s both/and. Brian McLaren sheds some light on this for us:

First of all, he says, “we need to understand the difference between mercy and justice (see Micah 6:8). Mercy means relieving the suffering of people who are victims of injustice. Justice means addressing the systemic abuses of power that plunge people into suffering.”

And secondly, he says, “Both are important. But if we only do mercy, we end up assisting those who perpetrate injustice by “cleaning up the mess” that they create.” And by doing justice, we help to eliminate the causes of human suffering.

I think a lot about mercy and justice these days – and yes, the issue of “welcome” – as we face new political realities in our country, and as we face the seemingly daily assaults on the values of mercy and justice and welcome that we have often taken for granted.

This coming Tuesday, we’ll observe Independence Day, the day 241 years ago on which the founders of this country declared independence from the British monarchy and rejected tyranny in all its forms. We observe that courageous act this year at a time when so much of what has been achieved in our modern

democratic republic is at risk. The president's travel ban, partially upheld this past week by the Supreme Court, amounts to a rejection of our tradition of welcome – this time largely based on religion. No more “karibu” here. There is chaos surrounding the attempts by Congress and the president to create a new health care law. And what they are proposing so far threatens tens of millions of our people with the loss of health insurance in order to give a tax break to our wealthiest citizens. It makes it very clear that what they care about is wealth, not health. Wealth care, not health care. Where is the mercy in that? And now the president wants to require states to submit voter data in a thinly veiled attempt to manipulate our electoral process. Where is the justice? This one is, thankfully, being rejected by states across the country in a bi-partisan fashion. To comply would represent a serious threat to our democracy, and their rejection is a welcome pushback against the new tyranny.

We could go on.

Jesus seemed to know that by welcoming and being welcomed we come to know one another and begin to build the bonds of compassion and mercy for a world being made new. And mercy leads us to justice in order to create the systemic and sustainable conditions for that world based in compassion and mercy. Yes, we must continue to provide food for those who are hungry and do not have enough. It's an important part of our ministry and our outreach right here. But we must also work for, pray for, and vote for social and economic justice – for fair tax policies that do not privilege the rich at the expense of the poor; for adequate social safety nets so that everyone has enough; health care for all; and for access to quality education and affordable housing.

And it all begins with the spirit of welcome – that sense of delight in being in another's presence, which is the basis for community – the beloved community that Jesus came to show and to share. It was that beloved community he envisioned for us and for those first disciples when he encouraged them saying, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” Karibu!

The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

