

## **The Reward of Welcome**

Matthew 10:40-42, 11:1

June 26, 2011

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; and 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.

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In my regular Bible study this week, one of my study partners – who happens to be married to my colleague Sarah over there – made the observation that when we read anything, but especially scripture, we should pay attention when something is mentioned three times.

In the three short verses we read from Matthew Jesus mentions a “reward” three times. But he uses the word “welcome” six times. That got me thinking about why...

Biblically speaking, “welcome,” or, hospitality is more than practicing good manners. It is more than evidence of the fact that you have been raised right by your momma. In biblical times (and perhaps down here in the South) hospitality is a way of being; it is an orientation to the world into which God has placed us.

Sometimes hospitality can - almost literally - rescue us.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the train stopped at our destination: a tiny fishing village on the Mediterranean coast. Our travel book was scant on what we might find. It said there were two hostels which usually closed around 9:00, and we had yet to make a reservation.

Our trip began at 7:30 on the previous morning. As graduate students in our mid-twenties, our group of four had one granola bar, one bottle of water and one bottle of very nice French wine between us. We knew it was going to be a long train ride for our weekend getaway to Italy, but we weren't counting on the train stopping – not once, not twice, but three times – on account of worker strikes.

When we finally got off that train and stepped onto the platform into the dark of night, each of us secretly wished we weren't yet considered “grown-ups.” We would have gladly given up our independence for the comfort of having someone else take responsibility for us.

But there we were. And so, backpacks loaded, English-Italian dictionaries on the ready, we walked into the village of about 2,000 people with no plans and not knowing what to expect. We were scared, hungry, and very much tired.

After 15 minutes of aimless wandering down the dimly lit streets of the village, we saw a single headlight approaching. We huddled together while a three-wheeled pick-up truck pulled up beside us. A couple, probably in their late 70's, stopped and began speaking Italian much faster than anyone of us could understand. Soon, the man got out of the truck and motioned for us to hop in the back.

We were in no place to argue, so we did. Through hand motions, we indicated that we needed food and sleep. The man nodded, and drove us and our bags through a few alleys and to a bar that still had some life. They had stopped serving food, but our host talked with the bartender and pulled something out of the kitchen. Provisions in hand, he and his wife took us to an apartment they owned nearby. In it were four of the most comfortable beds you have ever seen.

We had a grand total of \$20 as a group, which we offered to the couple with apology. They smiled, patted our hands, and said "caio!" as they left us to sleep. The next morning we waited to thank them, but they never showed up. If memory serves, we scrawled a note on a napkin and left it on the apartment door; a feeble attempt to express our gratitude.

Sometimes, hospitality can rescue us.

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Other times, we may miss (or almost miss) an opportunity to show hospitality to others because of our fear.

Dale Mullinex is a pastor in Charlotte, NC. He started his ministry as an associate pastor at Myers Park Baptist Church, a large, active church committed to outreach. Dale's responsibilities included being the pastor for mission. A few years after he had been there, he began to receive complaints in his department.

Myers Park Baptist had a chapel that it kept open around the clock for members to come in and center themselves in prayer. One day, a member who usually came to the chapel after her daily practice of meditation was startled to find a man in the chapel who had obviously set-up camp. He had slept on the pew, and taken the liberty of claiming a corner for his kitchen. Needless to say, Dale and the board of deacons were quickly

notified and conversation ensued about whether to begin locking the chapel doors.

Dale decided to check out the situation before coming to a decision, so he started coming to the chapel at nights. After a few tries, Dale came in one night to find the man parked in the corner just as the woman had said. Before asking him to leave, Dale managed to get the man's name which he then reported to the deacons. As it turns out, the man had been baptized in the church and grew up attending Vacation Bible School, and youth group, and Sunday school before developing mental illness in his early thirties.

Sometimes we can miss (or almost miss) an opportunity to show hospitality to others because of our fear.

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Still other times, we may just find out that hospitality is the point, after all.

On Tuesday morning, earlier than anyone wants to wake up, four members of our church, Anna, Madeline, David, and Chris will arrive at the Shreveport International Airport to embark on a 20 hour trip to Dhaka, Bangladesh. They will be spending 12 days in Bangladesh with our missionaries, Les and Cindy Morgan. As Sarah said last week in her sermon, the group is not going to "do" anything. They are not building a house; they are not digging a well; they are not teaching a class.

And apart from their luggage and their notable spiritual gifts, they are not taking anything, either. As Christians going to a country that is 90% Muslim and about 9% Hindu, Anna, Madeline, David and Chris are not "taking Jesus" to people who need to be saved. Jesus is already at work in Bangladesh, and has been for quite some time. No, the group from our church are going to Bangladesh to walk beside Les and Cindy Morgan who have been living the gospel by the way they tend to those who need medical attention and care.

Anna, Madeline, David and Chris are going to Bangladesh as pilgrims. Their journey will take them to an unfamiliar land with unfamiliar people and unfamiliar customs. And, perhaps the most significant and transformative part of their journey is that they will be *welcomed* – welcomed by Les and Cindy Morgan who will act as their hosts, welcomed

by the Presbyterian Church of Bangladesh, welcomed into the homes of Muslim and Hindu families who will share their food and table for dinner, welcomed to the bedside of the sick and dying who are patients in the clinics where Les and Cindy work.

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A few minutes ago I read some words from Matthew's gospel that Jesus left for all who would do ministry in his name. The passage that we read is at the end of Jesus' motivational speech in Matthew's gospel. Jesus recognizes the need to share the ministry of the gospel, so he commissions his followers with some advice about how to carry on the ministry that he started.

Within the speech there are instructions about what to do: pray, heal, proclaim. There are sober warnings about what to expect: it won't always be easy, there will be moments when you will feel alone. There are words of comfort to calm our fears and trust in the God who counts all the hairs on our heads. There is a call to allegiance – putting the gospel first our lives.

And finally, with the part that we read, Jesus concludes his speech with these words:

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

“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.”

What if this encouragement to be hospitable was more than a post-script at the end of Jesus' speech?

What if a posture of welcome is the umbrella under which all ministry in Jesus name should take place?

What if - in the welcoming and being welcomed of stranger, friends, and family – together we might most clearly see and experience the love of the God who sent Jesus to proclaim the gospel?

And what if this embrace of hospitality is precisely the reward of which Jesus speaks?