

A Welcome Beyond All Welcomes Matthew 3: 13-17
January 13, 2008
Rev. Mary A. James

Today, we celebrate our community, and we lift up with joy our ability to offer welcome to one another! One of the really great things about this church is that it is a really friendly church, so it was very natural for us to think of having a New Year's open house of sorts to encourage folks to take the leap and step through the doors and see what goes on here. Now, we might think of offering a welcome as a small thing, but when you think about it, it really is a powerful act. It is also in danger of becoming something of a lost art in highly technological, highly structured cultures such as ours. We may be able to reach folks anywhere in the world in the blink of an eye on the world wide web, but we often fail to take the time to say hello to our neighbors. Thank goodness, then, for the sparkle and joy of a friendly church, a church that understands at its core that the art of welcoming people is an essential part of a spiritual life.

The moment of first meeting a new person, or stepping into a new place, is a vulnerable one, isn't it? We all know how great it feels to receive a warm welcome after taking the risk of entering into a new situation. A warm welcome is one of the most powerful ways we can offer assurance, affirmation, and a sense of belonging to one another.

A snub from someone can be a demeaning and wounding experience, even from someone we don't really know well. Even worse is the failure of someone we really care about to welcome us fully into their hearts: I remember the story of a young woman who said that despite all she had done to be a good and accomplished daughter, her mother had told her that she was the single biggest disappointment in her life. This is surely the opposite of a warm welcome, an anti-welcome that had played out very sadly over a lifetime, that one statement like an arrow to the heart from which this young woman had to work hard every day to recover.

I recall a personal experience of being welcomed that was especially powerful, because it happened to me at that horribly self-conscious age of 12. My family had just moved into a new town, and it was the first day of seventh grade. I was so nervous, I was sick to my stomach! I remember my carefully selected outfit; I remember that I did not know a soul, child or adult. As the kids gathered outside the school before the school doors opened, they formed clusters, standing in closed groups. I stood there alone, in my new dress clutching my new binder, wanting to go home and missing my old friends in my old town really desperately. Then, what felt at the time like a small miracle happened. Lisa, who would become one of my best friends, came up to me, said hello, introduced herself, and took me under her wing. Suddenly, the entire experience changed. I felt completely different! My stomach stopped hurting. I felt reassured, and as Lisa introduced me to other kids, I even started to feel excited and interested in this new venture. What a difference a welcome makes!

There is, of course, One who welcomes us radically, completely, and unconditionally, and for all time. In our passage from the book of Acts, Peter describes God as having no partiality, and loving all people, wherever they are from, whoever they might be. To be loved and welcomed by God, it is not necessary to fit in, to have status, to be cool, or to have the right connections; in fact, liberation theologians argue compellingly from scripture that the less you have, the more God will be your champion. God is so good at extravagantly welcoming his children that we can do our worst, and, like the "prodigal son," we will still be received in love and showered with grace when we return.

In the account of the baptism of Jesus read by Marilou today, it is so wonderful to hear the personal, profound, loving words of God, “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” This is the opposite of the frequent human failure to welcome! God spoke words of loving approval of Jesus, a full-throttle affirmation and welcome as he began his worldly ministry. To this day, of course, baptism is one of our most cherished rituals in our church. It is a form of ritualized welcoming, which they even do in churches that aren’t so friendly! Baptism saves us from the danger of our own ineptitude at welcoming one another into our hearts. In that beautiful sacrament, we welcome folks into the church, and we remind ourselves of God’s profound and unfailing and steadfast welcome, available to us at all times. Baptism indeed reminds us of an essential, liberating truth: that we, each one of us, are God’s children.

Henri Nouwen, whom we have mentioned here before, was a Dutch Catholic priest who passed away about a decade ago. He is survived by his insightful writings, and has emerged as one of the great spiritual writers and guides of our time. Nouwen was wonderful at conveying a sense of how deeply we are welcomed into the heart of God, and how well loved we all are by God. At one point, he wrote a series of letters to a young friend who asked him for guidance in the spiritual life, and these letters became a book called Letters to Marc about Jesus. In it, Henri Nouwen gently and eloquently encourages the young Marc to open his heart to God in Christ, to trust that God loved him just as he was. He wrote of the transcendent experience of accepting the welcome that God extends to us. For Nouwen, to welcome Christ is to accept One who can “disarm death and rob despair of its power; something much more than a new outlook on things, a new confidence, or a new joy in living, something that can only be described as a new life or a new spirit.” To encounter the Divine in Christ was to become “conscious of a freedom (one) could hardly anticipate...a freedom beyond...asking...a freedom of the spirit.” For Nouwen, this spirit-freedom went beyond the challenges and limitations of daily life, and remained even in times of great suffering and strife. Now this is a WELCOME. This is a welcome we **need**, because heaven knows life is full of times of suffering. To accept God’s welcome is to accept our own “belovedness,” and to accept that we are held close to the heart of our compassionate God even when life, and other humans, don’t give us such a great welcome.

Friends, as we welcome one another today, we are invited to welcome two others. We are warmly invited, of course, to welcome the God who loves us no matter what. This leads us to the hardest welcoming challenge of all, because if the God of the universe loves us whether we have it all together or not, or whether the people in our lives have wounded us or not, well...then we are invited to consider a big welcome not only to one another and to God, but to OURSELVES. You, me—we **are** God’s beloved. You, me—we **have** a beloved in God. To accept this is to welcome the idea that we, even we, are precious. Always. No matter what. Now THAT’s a welcome. Amen.