

Welcome

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 10:40-42

Willie James Jennings is a noted theologian at Yale Divinity School. His resume/curriculum vitae gives the impression he won the Super Bowl for Smart People. Yet, for all his accomplishments, he was once just a kid helping his mother tend her garden in the backyard of their home in Grand Rapids, MI. It was here that a twelve-year-old Willie James Jennings had an encounter that would stick with him, even providing grist for his future study and research.

Jennings describes his parents as great storytellers, whose wealth of anecdotes carried a few consistent themes, foremost among them was Jesus. Jennings says, “To say they were devout Christians is simply too pale a descriptor. A far more accurate characterization would be, “There were Ivory, Mary, and Jesus’ ... The stories of Jesus and Israel were so tightly woven together into the stories [his] parents told of themselves ... that it took [Willie] years to separate the biblical figures from extended family members ... biblical places of pain from their places of pain ... They knew the Bible, but, far more important, they knew the world through the Bible.” (Willie James

Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*)

Being raised in such a framework is what made the garden encounter that much more strange and significant. I don't know about you, but having someone suddenly appear in my backyard without notice would certainly startle me and set my antennae toward apprehension. But in 1973, a twelve-year-old black adolescent being confronted in his own backyard by two formal looking white middle-aged males, would set off all kinds of alarms.

The men introduced themselves to Mary and Willie as members of First Christian Reformed Church down the street, and proceeded to give what seemed to be a rehearsed speech about what the church was trying to do in the neighborhood and what kind of programs they had for children. Fairly innocuous stuff. Probably well-intentioned in the minds of Jennings' visitors. Evangelism even. You would hope every church would be invitational to their surrounding neighborhood. I would certainly hope that we would be.

And yet, there was something a little off in this encounter. Aside from the alarms set off by two white men approaching a black adolescent in 1973, it's a pretty presumptuous move to go unannounced and uninvited

into someone's backyard, especially in an era when racial mores gave whites the illusion they had license to transgress boundaries with black people that they would never transgress with white people. Second, in spite of their good intentions, they gave their prescribed speech without any inquiry about or interest in Mary Jennings' own faith journey, and they spoke to 12-year-old Willie as if he was a kindergartener or a slow learner. So they had no idea that every time sunlight broke through the opening door, invading the sacred space of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, it was probably shining upon Mary Jennings. They wouldn't know that every Sunday after church, Mary and Ivory visited every person on the shut-in list. If they had asked about Mary's faith journey, her visitors may have left as the ones who had learned more about Jesus that day. But they didn't ask, and continued on according to their script and left as they came, unawares.

Sometimes, oftentimes, even a welcome can be unwelcoming. But you know that, don't you? You've probably felt the sting of the unwelcoming welcome. He's shaking your hand, and the words *So-glad-to-see-you* are hanging in the air, but his eyes are focused over your shoulder, afraid to miss a more important target for his attention. Perhaps you've known encounters where you've heard the words, *So-good-to-see-you*, knowing it

isn't true. No one wants to be a social sideshow, ranking an invitation, welcome not included. What does Sheriff Andy Taylor say to Deputy Fife when Barney encourages him to attend a big social occasion? "Barney, I'm not going to a dance and stand in a stag line with Old Man Schwamp."

Even introverts like to be acknowledged, included as if the party would be less without you. When Donna and I were young, newly married, we had no money, but we had an education, and so, in our minds, being adult and responsible meant making an appointment with a financial planner. I don't know why we thought that. We had no money. I don't know what we thought a financial planner could possibly say to us. *Well, looking over your portfolio, I've lined out a couple of investment options for you. You can either invest your assets in a movie ticket ... as long as it's a matinee, or you can go grab dinner at the K&W Cafeteria.* Anyway, we make the appointment and go to a fancy office building in Southpark ... big reception desk ... receptionist from central casting ... and we hear those famous words. *Have a seat, and I'll tell him you are here. I'm sure he'll be right with you.*

You know the drill, we sit down; trying to appear more at ease than we are; silently watching the well-heeled foot traffic go back and forth, back and forth. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen ... twenty minutes. Okay, the guy's not a heart surgeon, so he can't be stuck in a heart transplant back there. Twenty-five minutes. Clock's ticking toward thirty ... and simultaneously, we look at one another, whispering the words, *Let's get out of here.*

You know, no harm, no foul. We probably had no business being there in the first place. But most folks know and everybody hates the feeling of being unacknowledged, unrecognized, unimportant, or unwelcome. You don't need folks fawning over you (*If you do, well ... that's another sermon for another day*), but the dignity of being seen, of being regarded as someone whose story is worth hearing, regarded as one whose life matters — the value of that is inestimable.

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

You ever watch those war movies where the officers and pilots or platoon leaders are gathered in a Quonset hut and some general is up front, a big map posted on a display board behind him; and with pointer in hand, he is highlighting the details of their strategy for the impending mission? Our text today is an excerpt from that meeting. Jesus is giving his newly appointed apostles the details of their impending mission. Can't you see those apostles sitting out there in those big high-backed, thickly cushioned seats they reserve for the pilots; a cup of steaming black coffee in one hand, a little engineer's pencil in the other, furiously taking notes in a pocket sized spiral notebook, a pair of Ray-Bans hanging from a breast pocket; giving those knowing side-glances to the guy next to them as if to say, *I've got your back*.

This is that meeting for Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew and all the rest. Part review of tactics, strategies and procedures; part warning about obstacles and threats; part Knute Rockne *win-one-for-the-gipper* speech — Jesus is highlighting what it means to be a

disciple. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” And don’t you know, that just like the war movie, there’s some arrogant apostle in the back throwing shade at Jesus’ serious tone. *Whoa! Aren’t you being a little melodramatic, Jesus? I mean, who’s going to resist my charm, this good news, or this expression of love?*

But Jesus knows, doesn’t he? Jesus knows that the concept, the philosophy of welcome is a radical idea. Jesus knows that welcome is universally affirmed and invariably complicated. Welcome. The Greek word at its root is *dexomai* — to welcome, to receive. To receive, what does that imply? Do you remember *The Music Man* — Robert Preston, Shirley Jones, Ron Howard (i.e., Opie)? Do you remember the song, *The Wells Fargo Wagon*? It probably gives some of our bankers here a headache, but it’s a great show tune. *Oh the Wells Fargo Wagon is a coming down the street; Oh please let it be for me...* There is excitement. There is anticipation. There is possibility. *I got a box of maple sugar on my birthday. In March I got a grey mackinaw. And Once I got some grapefruit from Tampa. Montgom'ry Ward sent me a bathtub and a cross cut saw.* There is joy, there is hope in discovering what you could receive. Oh the Wells Fargo Wagon is a coming

down the street. I wish I wish I knew what it could be. That's the spirit of receiving, of welcome that Jesus is talking about.

I remember a season of moodiness early in my ministry. The luster of institutional ministry had corroded a bit. Everybody, it seemed had something to complain about. And I remember thinking I should have been a UPS driver because the people actually anticipate and want to receive what you are bringing to them.

Granted, there are some things in life you actually don't want to receive: a bill; a summons; a virus. But what joy there can be in the anticipation and experience of receiving something ... what joy there can be in the anticipation and experience of receiving, welcoming someone, and that is true whether you are the one receiving, welcoming, or the one being received, being welcomed.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Jesus is saying that a primary way to experience his presence, the way to know God's in attendance is in the act of welcoming and being welcomed.



So, why is welcome such a hard concept for us? Well, for one thing, it requires vulnerability and curiosity on the part of both the one welcoming and the one being welcomed, and it is a challenge to find two people in that same place at the same time. Living in this age of distrust, we have built up our armor to deflect and defend against difference; we have developed this hyper-sensitive radar that over-inflates everything into a threat. Welcome? But what if she's a republican, he's a democrat? What if he is Hindi, she's a Pentecostal? What if they have an agenda? What is it they are trying to sell me? She strikes me as mean. How'd he come up with that outfit? She seems standoffish. He's just weird.

We measure, we stereotype, we categorize, we go to great lengths to arrive at that comfortable place called suspicion. But to welcome someone requires us to lose at least some of the armor. To receive someone requires a measure of curiosity. Welcome necessitates never wanting to leave an encounter without having learned something, not for purposes of judgement, mind you, but for the purpose of understanding. We are always less inclined to judge someone, avoid someone, ignore someone if we understand them, possess an empathy for their journey, a genuine interest in their story.

Which means, there is no welcome if it is all about you. The problem in Willie James Jennings garden wasn't that the visitors were offering information about the church they loved and served. The problem was that they had no genuine interest in the story of Mary Jennings, the gifts of Willie Jennings. They came as they left, wrapped up in their own story, their own worldview. They were more than willing to share, but not patient enough to listen and learn.

Have you ever experienced an unbalanced conversation, you know, you mention an experience or introduce a thought, and the other person is off to the races regaling you with their story, their insights, their child's genius, their brushes with celebrity, their complaints, their world? The spotlight has narrowed, shining on them alone, and you are in the darkened audience. They don't pause for your insight or your experience, and they leave without having learned or understood anything about you.

If you leave an encounter without having learned something, understanding something from another perspective, you haven't welcomed anyone. But what if ... what if you knew that every person you met had a story to tell, a story worth hearing and understanding? Jesus said, "Whoever

welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” What if you understood that with every person you meet there is the opportunity to encounter God.

Without fail, I learn something at a funeral. I may have known the deceased, worked with the deceased, laughed with the deceased, baptized the deceased; but meeting with the family upon their death, I learn a lot. I hear stories. I learn about events, encounters, achievements, failures, obstacles overcome, suffering endured, triumphs celebrated.

There is depth and breadth in every life that remains hidden if not unearthed through curiosity, hospitality, and welcome. If we don't welcome, if we don't ask, we'll never learn, we'll never understand, and invariably we will miss an encounter with God. Amen.