

Matthew 10:40-42

(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, 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."



"Welcome"

In his short teaching on compassion, Jesus used welcome six times, and reward three times. Welcoming and identifying with the prophet (those who have no appreciation for the daily compromises required for getting along); welcoming and identifying with the righteous (the truly good people who don't trash the place but make us look at our own life and upset our routine); and welcoming and identifying with the children (the vulnerable, needy, and powerless) in gathering his community was the way in which Jesus wove together his disciples in love. Welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome is the way in which Jesus still weaves together and rewards his family of faith today. "The power of one is impressive, the power of community is awe-inspiring," wrote Rev. Luna to remind us of our reward, reward, reward.

In his reflection on this passage, Evan Howard wrote about the rewards of fully knowing Jesus and loving every aspect of him. "God's presence is always and forever available to us in and through Jesus. The only requirement is that we open our hearts. The more extravagant the welcome, the greater the refreshment, the deeper the grounding, the clearer the enlightenment, the stronger the inspiration that will flow from it. The welcome must be extravagant in sincerity and persistence in order to overcome opposition to it. Each day brings burdens and challenges, and these can become so urgent that they smother the welcoming impulse. But daily concerns are transitory. Only God abides forever, and we belong to God in all circumstances---not only the joyful but also the mundane and excruciating ones. Trustworthy messengers remind us of this---apostles and prophets, righteous persons and children. Most of all Jesus himself. He lived in this place of welcome more than anyone ever has. When we invite him into our circumstances, we gain entry into his kingdom beyond, the kingdom in which all wounds are healed, all injustices made right, all joys realized in their glorious fullness. Here we transcend our puny mortality with its frail, time-bound limitations and step into the larger life of eternity. Here we receive the reward that really matters---God's blessing (Christian Century, June 17, 2008, p. 21).

More than forty years before Independence, four German families built a log church on a hill in the central part of the Pennsylvania colony. Soon it was the center of a growing community of German-speaking farmers. On Sundays the church served as a house of worship. On weekdays it was used as a school for children, as well as for quilting bees and social dinners, and as a meeting place to talk about crops and taxes and roads. After the Battle of Brandywine, in 1777, the church became a temporary hospital. Rebecca Lapp and Katarina Vetter nursed the sick men, the hungry, the hurt. Among them were two soldiers fighting on the side of the British. They were Hessian mercenaries from Germany, lost and very frightened. Katarina spoke to them in German, dressed their wounds, gave them soup and brown bread. She took away their uniforms and burned them in secret, just beyond the silent gates of the churchyard. One of the Hessian soldiers went off to fight with General George Washington. The other, Wilhelm Brubaker, stayed behind to marry Katarina Vetter. The wedding took place on a soft summer morning, and the church was so crowded that many people stood outside to listen through the open doors and windows. This Independence Day story comes from Pioneer Church, a children's book based upon the history of Old Zion Reformed Church in Brickerville, Pennsylvania. It was written by Carolyn Otto, the daughter of a retired UCC minister, and illustrated by Megan Lloyd. While Pioneer Church is grounded on fact, Carolyn Otto admits that parts of the story are fiction. Although "there's no specific tale of a mercenary soldier who married a nurse called Katarina," she says, "it is estimated that fewer than half of the Hessian survivors returned to Germany after the Revolution. Many Hessian soldiers had deserted to the Continental Army; many settled in America." We may not usually think of wartime and welcome together. But even during the Revolution, congregations did not forget who they were--- and whose they were.

The plaque on the base of the Statue of Liberty reads: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these,

the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Some churches, cities, and interfaith groups in America continue to remember who and whose they are in our current war on terror by welcoming refugees. In Maryland there's the Montgomery County Interfaith Refugee Resettlement Neighbors, which was founded in 2015 partly in response to governor Larry Hogan's request, that then-President Obama, not settle Syrian refugees in the state. Other churches, cities, and interfaith groups welcome immigrants. In Hyattsville Md., the Mennonite Church has been a sanctuary church since 1980 when they helped people fleeing from the violence and devastation of the wars in Central America. "Today the situation is different. . . For Hyattsville Mennonite, offering sanctuary might mean housing undocumented persons, but that's not their central question. In 2013, their church became a "Safe Congregation" and promised that "each person in the midst of our church community should have the assurance that our church is a safe place, without fear or threat of violence." Now they ask what it means to be a safe church committed to building a safe community. They are learning about the impact of changes in immigration laws on their neighbors. They've asked migrant organizations what they need; learned their rights and the rights of the undocumented; partnered with a neighboring church with a large migrant population; learned how to protect individuals subject to deportation; engaged with the city council as it considered declaring Hyattsville a sanctuary city (which it did in April); attended public protests; and contacted their members of Congress." (Sojourners, July 2017, p. 10-11)

Whoever, wherever, whatever you are
on life's journey you are welcome here.
Today as we come to the welcome table of our Lord, may we receive God's blessing as the Holy Spirit graces our minds with the many ways in which Christ welcomes, without precondition, the weak, the hungry, the stranger---the despised, forgotten and downtrodden---the immigrant and refugee in our midst.