

Welcoming Christ: The Joy of Authentic Service

Bible reference for sermon Matthew 10:40–42

⁴⁰ "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ 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, ⁴² 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."

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are some passages of Scripture that seem almost too simple. Today's Gospel reading is one of them. Jesus speaks about welcoming people.

Receiving people.

Offering hospitality. Giving a cup of cold water to someone in need. There is no amazing miracle, no astonishing healing. Just welcome. Just kindness. Just hospitality. Just a cup of water.

And yet Jesus tells us that these seemingly small acts carry extraordinary significance:

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones... none of these will lose their reward."

At first glance, it sounds almost too ordinary. But perhaps that is precisely the point. Because most of life is ordinary. Most discipleship happens not in dramatic moments but in everyday encounters. Most opportunities to serve Christ arrive disguised as interruptions, inconveniences, strangers, neighbours, visitors, lonely people, difficult people, and people whose stories we do not yet know. And it is there, Jesus says, that we encounter him.

These verses come at the end of Jesus' missionary discourse. For an entire chapter Jesus has been preparing his disciples to go out into the world. He has warned them that following him will not always be easy. They will face rejection, misunderstanding, and opposition. They will discover that loving others sometimes comes at a cost. Then, almost unexpectedly, Jesus turns his attention away from those who are sent and focuses on those who receive them. He speaks to the hosts. The greeters. The encouragers. The supporters. The people who provide shelter, friendship, food, kindness, and care. In other words, he speaks to ordinary disciples. Jesus reminds them that ministry is never just about those standing at the front. The kingdom of God advances through countless acts of hospitality and compassion performed by people whose names may never appear in church histories.



Someone opens a door. Someone offers a meal. Someone listens. Someone notices. Someone welcomes. And Christ says, "When you do that, you are welcoming me." That is a remarkable claim. Jesus identifies himself so closely with his followers that receiving them becomes receiving him. And receiving him becomes receiving the God who sent him. Hospitality becomes holy ground.



Of course, hospitality in the Christian sense is much deeper than simply being polite. Australians generally pride themselves on being friendly people. We greet visitors. We chat over a coffee. We help out a neighbour. These are good things. But alongside these good things we are seeing the rise of extremist views that create fear, exclude and divide.

The hospitality of the Gospel is not simply welcoming people who are like us. It is welcoming people because they belong to God. We share the gospel amongst us but we all look and sound very different from each other. Our precious partners in ministry in the Chinese Lutheran Church would not be here if we didn't welcome as Jesus calls us to welcome.



You might remember Hannah's children's address from a few weeks ago, where she was a bouncer who wouldn't let people in unless they had the right answers to her questions. Maybe you thought, "Surely we would never do that." Yet perhaps the question is not whether we do the same thing. The question is whether we do similar things in more subtle ways. Do we find it easier to welcome people who think like us? People who share our background? People who are similar in age, education, culture, politics, or social standing? Do we unconsciously create circles of belonging that are easier for some to enter than others? Do newcomers genuinely feel welcomed? Do younger people? Do older people? Do people carrying grief? Do people living with disability? Do people struggling financially? Do people whose family situations are complicated? Do people who don't yet know the language of church? These are challenging questions. Because authentic hospitality requires more than opening a door. It requires opening our hearts.

Authentic, joyful service
A desire for serving others to move beyond a sense of duty to a genuine expression of love, compassion, and hospitality inspired by Christ's example of humility.

One of the values of this congregation is: **Authentic, joyful service — a desire for serving others to move beyond a sense of duty to a genuine expression of love, compassion, and hospitality inspired by Christ's example of humility.**

That value could almost be a summary of today's Gospel. Did you notice that Jesus does not praise grand achievements? He praises a cup of cold water. A simple act. A humble act. An act that costs little. Yet an act done in love.

Sometimes we imagine that Christian service must be impressive to matter. We think of missionaries, pastors, theologians, church leaders, and great saints. But Jesus continually directs our attention elsewhere. To ordinary faithfulness. To hidden kindness. To unnoticed acts of mercy. To people who quietly serve without recognition. To those who make coffee after worship. Those who visit the sick. Those who prepare meals. Those who welcome visitors. Those who sit beside someone who is lonely. Those who send a card. Those who make a phone call. Those who listen. Those who pray. The kingdom of God is built by countless cups of cold water. And often the people who offer them never realise the impact they have made.

There is another dimension to hospitality that Jesus invites us to consider. Hospitality changes not only the guest. It changes the host. We often assume that we are the ones giving. But frequently we receive far more than we offer.



Many of us can recall occasions when someone we thought we were helping ended up teaching us something about courage, faith, resilience, gratitude, or hope. We expected to serve. Instead, we were transformed. Hospitality is both a practice and a spiritual discipline. It opens us to people who are different from us and allows us to encounter new perspectives, new stories, and new experiences of God's grace. When we welcome others, we discover that God is already at work in their lives. We discover gifts we did not expect. Wisdom, we did not anticipate. Faith that challenges our assumptions. Sometimes the very people we think we are serving become God's messengers to us. And perhaps that is why Jesus identifies himself with those we welcome. Because Christ often arrives in unexpected people.

Of course, authentic welcome is not always easy. Real hospitality involves vulnerability. It involves risk. Opening ourselves to others means opening ourselves to disappointment. Love is never completely safe. Jesus knew this. He had just spent much of Matthew chapter 10 warning his disciples about rejection and suffering. The path of love sometimes leads through hurt. The path of welcome sometimes leads through misunderstanding. The path of compassion sometimes leads through heartbreak. Yet Jesus does not retreat from love because of those risks. And neither should we. What role do we have in speaking against political policy that would have us fear the stranger and close our borders? How do we speak Jesus' words into places that would exclude the other?

The cross itself teaches us that love can be costly. But the resurrection teaches us that love ultimately wins. The Christian life is not about protecting ourselves from every possible disappointment. It is about continuing to love because God first loved us. Authentic, joyful service is possible because our service flows from God's grace rather than from our own strength. We do not serve in order to earn God's love. We serve because we have already received it.

Matthew's Gospel constantly reminds us that the church is a sent community. Every baptised person is sent into the world as a bearer of Christ's presence. Some are sent across oceans, like Hanna Schulz, who spoke to us last week. Some are sent into workplaces.

Some are sent into schools. Some are sent into retirement villages. Some are sent into communities. Some are sent into families. All are sent. And because all are sent, all are also called to welcome. Imagine what would happen if we truly believed that every person who crossed our path might be an opportunity to encounter Christ. Imagine if every conversation became an opportunity to extend grace. Imagine if every act of service became an act of worship. Imagine if every visitor who entered this church experienced not merely friendliness but the hospitality of God. That is the vision Jesus places before us. Not a church known for impressive programs. Not a church known for perfect organisation. Not a church known for protecting its traditions. But a church known for welcoming Christ wherever he appears.



Finally, Jesus speaks about reward. At first, that language can sound uncomfortable. It can seem as though Jesus is encouraging a spiritual transaction: do something good and receive something in return. But that is not what he means. The reward is not payment. It is participation. It is sharing in the life of God's kingdom. It is discovering Christ among us.

It is being transformed by grace. It is becoming more fully the people God created us to be. Every act of authentic hospitality draws us deeper into God's life. Every act of compassionate service enlarges our hearts. Every cup of cold water offered in Christ's name becomes part of God's redeeming work in the world. And none of it is wasted. None of it is forgotten. None of it is lost.

So today Jesus invites us to see the extraordinary hidden within the ordinary. To see Christ in the stranger. To see holiness in hospitality. To see ministry in a simple act of kindness. To see discipleship in a cup of cold water. And he invites us to live out our congregational value of **authentic, joyful service**—not serving from obligation, but from love; not from duty, but from grace; not seeking recognition, but seeking to reflect the humble hospitality of Christ. For whenever we welcome another in Jesus' name, we discover something astonishing: We are not merely welcoming them. We are welcoming Christ himself. And in welcoming Christ, we find the reward that can never be taken away.

May we live into these words:

Come as you are.

God loves you.

You are welcome here.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page <https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133>