

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 28, 2020 (Proper 8A)**

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

Most churches consider themselves to be incredibly welcoming. If you talk to parishioners at just about any church, they will tell you what a warm and welcoming congregation they are. It’s one of the things they take great pride in. People often remember their very first Sunday with fond and fuzzy feelings. They recall the smile the usher gave them when they walked through the front doors for the first time; the friendly person in the next pew who helped them figure out how to juggle the bulletin and the Prayer Book and the Hymnal; the woman who introduced herself at coffee hour and was genuinely interested to hear their story. Here at St. John’s that person even has a name, and that name is Donna Austin. I can’t tell you the number of people who have told me over the years that they came back the next Sunday precisely because Donna talked to them at coffee hour.

Many churches even have big signs out front that proclaim, “All Are Welcome!” And most Episcopal churches, including ours, have that ubiquitous red, white, and baby blue sign that says, “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” And that’s generally true. Especially if you look like the people inside and act like the people inside and think like the people inside and believe like the people inside.

But what if you don’t? Are you still welcome? It’s easy to be welcoming to people who are like you — racially, socioeconomically, politically, sexually. It’s a lot more challenging to be welcoming to those who are different.

About 20 years ago the phrase “radical welcome” came into vogue in church circles. St. Bart’s in New York City embraced the concept as part of their plan to infuse new energy and a new spirit into what was then a small and dying congregation with a massive building on Park Avenue. Their new rector, Bill Tully, held out a vision of “grow or go.” That was the choice. Either invite people in and embrace real change and grow the church, or shut your doors and be done with it and just go away. With this as a model and radical welcome as a philosophy, they grew into a vibrant, welcoming, thriving church.

Not long after that, Stephanie Spellers wrote a book called *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Stranger, and the Spirit of Transformation*. Some of you may know Stephanie — she served at the cathedral in Boston and now works on the staff of the Presiding Bishop. She defines radical welcome as “the spiritual practice that allows us to live into the compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream of God.” And she says it’s a lot more than a smiling face handing you a bulletin or a giant platter of munchkins at coffee hour. “A radically welcoming community,” she writes, “seeks to welcome the voices, presence and *power* of all people — especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced and closeted — so they can help to shape the congregation’s common life and fulfill the reconciling dream of God.”

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I spend a lot of time thinking about being welcoming to newcomers but much of this time, if I’m honest, is spent on tactics. Where to put the newcomers table, what to put in those red visitors packets we hand out, how to respond when someone fills out a pew card. But I don’t think any of us spend enough time

thinking about how welcoming The Other, how welcoming those on the margins of society, fulfills God's reconciling dream for this place. I know I don't.

Yet Jesus reminds us that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome God. When we take that seriously, that is a stunning and radical realization. How could we *not* welcome God? How could we not welcome the fullness of God's "compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream?"

Well, part of the hesitation is that welcoming other people and other voices, even if we do truly believe that to welcome them is to welcome God, changes us. And do we really *want* to be changed? Do we really want to invite such vulnerability? Do we really have the courage to enter into God's "compassionate just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream" when it's so much safer and so much more comfortable to remain on *this* side of the river? Boundary crossing involves risk. And the inherent admission that, perhaps, we don't have all the answers in and of ourselves.

The reality is that we need other voices and visions in order to mirror the fullness of God's plan for this community. Now, we can't simply manufacture these voices or compel others to walk with us. But we *can* take a hard look at ourselves and wonder just how welcoming we are. Are we welcoming in the glad-you're-here-now-fill-out-this-pledge-card kind of way or are we radically welcoming in the sense that we are open to transformation and new ways of entering into God's "compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream?"

I have been very aware that online church has thrown all of this up in the air. No one is able to stay for coffee hour afterwards and enjoy the high quality, fair trade coffee we serve. No one is able to pick up one of the green mugs we reserve for visitors and newcomers. No one is able to chat with me or other parishioners informally after the service to get a better sense of this place.

But I just want to take a moment to officially say "welcome" to all of you who have joined us for our online services these past few months. I know you have many options — literally thousands of them! Some with, and I know this is hard to even imagine, better production values than we have. But before you log off and go over to the Washington National Cathedral — and actually you can do both since their service doesn't start until 11:15 am — I want you to know how grateful I am, how grateful we all are that you have chosen to worship with us.

We're going to be live streaming our services for the long haul. Even when we eventually get back to in-person worship, we'll keep showing up online on Sunday morning. I know some of you who regularly join us will return to your own parishes when it's safe to do so. And I know some of you who are local and who started watching since the pandemic started, will join us once we regather in person. But I also know that you are all part of this community *right now*. And I am so glad you are walking through this moment with us — and, wow, it has been a moment.

Thank you all for being part of this "compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream" to which we aspire. To be sure, we have some radical welcoming to do in order to live ever more fully into this vision. But if we remain open to the idea of being challenged and changed by the presence of other people and other voices — and see this as a blessing — the dream remains alive.