

God On Our Doorstep
Rev. Matt Landry
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Luke 10: 1-11, The Message Bible

10 1-2 *Later the Master selected seventy and sent them ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go. He gave them this charge:*

"What a huge harvest! And how few the harvest hands. So on your knees; ask the God of the Harvest to send harvest hands. 3 "On your way! But be careful—this is hazardous work. You're like lambs in a wolf pack. 4 "Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage. "Don't loiter and make small talk with everyone you meet along the way.

5-6 *"When you enter a home, greet the family, 'Peace.' If your greeting is received, then it's a good place to stay. But if it's not received, take it back and get out. Don't impose yourself.*

7 *"Stay at one home, taking your meals there, for a worker deserves three square meals. Don't move from house to house, looking for the best cook in town.*

8-9 *"When you enter a town and are received, eat what they set before you, heal anyone who is sick, and tell them, 'God's kingdom is right on your doorstep!'*

10-12 *"When you enter a town and are not received, go out in the street and say, 'The only thing we got from you is the dirt on our feet, and we're giving it back. Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep?'*

Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep? At times it's hard to recognize or see God around us. Did you see God on our doorstep last week? What a wonderful Sunday it was celebrating the open house and consecrating our new Welcome Center, a place of hospitality and welcome to everyone. For me, I sensed God's presence as Steve and I walked down the steps of the grand staircase with the bell choir blessing us with music and we watched as all the faithful began to lay down the rocks they carried looking toward the future, ready to bless the new space. I could see it in your faces; excitement, joy, energy, and a desire to welcome everyone with this new space. It's a beautiful thing to witness a congregation who desires to create a "welcome center", a place of hospitality and welcome to all.

All throughout Scripture and especially in the New Testament, hospitality is an important characteristic of the Christian life. The Greek word for hospitality means "guest-friendship" or "love of strangers." Writer Henri Nouwen, who was a priest and author I go back to again and again, and I think that I have quoted in nearly every one of my sermons I have ever preached, wrote this: "Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place."

Did you hear his words, especially where he said that hospitality means the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy? I immediately thought of our welcome center. We have created a space dedicated to this theme of welcome. It is a dedicated place where relationships can be made and grow and where change can take place. I have already witnessed this on Sunday mornings, especially this past Sunday and really every day during the week as families interact as a part of our Children's Day In program downstairs. Our staff have been in the Welcome Center opening doors, saying hello,

waving to little kids, which what I mostly do, it's always fun. We are trying to be present in this free space created for intentional welcome and hospitality.

When I was in college, I wanted to experience everything my school had to offer. I decided to attend the University of Saint Francis because of the community that welcomed me on that first visit, the beautiful campus, the good academic reputation, and the solid football program, which I greatly enjoyed cheering on as the mascot for 4 years, I wanted to experience it all. My very first week on campus had me standing outside of the small Saint Francis Chapel wondering if I should go in for this thing called Mass. A short, wise, and kind nun, who was wearing the traditional brown habit of the Franciscans, was making her way toward the chapel and me. Not sure what to say or how to ask, recognizing how odd it was for me to inquire about a Mass since I had never been to one growing up Methodist, I asked if I could enter the Chapel for Mass even though I was wearing shorts and sandals, as it was move in day and quite warm. Sister Geraldine smiled and said in her soft and kind voice, "Yes, of course, and the chapel has air conditioning."

There was never a question if I was Christian or Catholic or why I wanted to join the fun, she invited me into a space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. She became my welcome center. Sister was with us when Zechariah was baptized last year and I had the chance to visit with her again last month. Whenever I visit the convent I feel like one of the family and it all began with a welcome and hospitality. It reminds me of that Gospel text: "God's kingdom is right on your doorstep!"

It is true that we need to extend a warm welcome to everyone who enters the doors of our church building, but it's also important to note that the building and our new welcome center represent us as a community. It's an extension of our spirit. It is our hope that everyone will sense God's kingdom on our doorstep, but the hospitality doesn't have to end when we leave this place. In fact, we are sent to meet people where they are.

That's the charge Jesus gave to the disciples. He sent the seventy out, two by two, to share the kingdom with all they would meet. This charge from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, comes right after he explains the cost of following. He tells them not to look back, but to keep moving forward. They are sent. We are sent. We are sent from this building, from the welcome center, to be agents of the kingdom. Embodying what it means to follow, to welcome, to be hospitable, and to bring in the harvest for God's community and kingdom.

This Gospel reading invites us into a life that is lived a little more vulnerable, a little more accessible, a little less defended. "Travel light". We don't need to take much. No need to bring our theology or doctrine, or our potential judgments or preconceived notions of who we might meet or who they are or whether they will ever enter the doors of our church. That's not really the point. We're sent out to bring love, forgiveness, and peace and to help people see and to tell them, "God's kingdom is right on your doorstep?" Jesus is reminding us that it's not about building an institution and not to expect people to come to us, but that we should go out to them and enter their lives and their houses, on their terms, and eat whatever they set before us. Can you imagine how that would transform a church, a neighborhood, and a city?

Maybe this could be our new "holy habit". A church is filled with people who have "holy habits". Perhaps your habit is coffee before church, which I highly recommend, or donuts after; maybe it's the perfect pew or right parking spot, we are all people of habit. In fact, our entire denomination was founded upon habits. A family, the Wesley's, in 19th Century England, were taught spiritual disciplines, especially in the form of what was right and wrong living. John Wesley adopted this understanding of making virtues our "holy habits". We would be methodical Christians. Habit and habitat go together. In fact, the words "habit," "habitat," and "inhabit" all come from the same root meaning "to hold or possess" or "to dwell." Maybe our new "holy habit" can be to dwell, not just in this place, but in the neighborhood, in the city, in the lives of others, embodying what the welcome center and this church stands for, the welcome and hospitality of Jesus Christ. We've created a free space where the stranger can become a friend in this building. Let's build a free space in our lives as well.

What happens in this church does not stay here. Things like praying, worshipping, learning, growing, accepting, forgiving, embracing, and gathering, do not stay in one place. They become the ethos of who we are as a community of faith. Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Grounded*, wrote these words, "Wesley's genius, and the genius of many other spiritual masters, was to develop ways for people to pay attention to habits and habitat, practicing love, acceptance, and kindness in ways that focus on spiritual attention and transform lives. Instead of dwelling in whatever happens to be of the moment, paying attention to what we do and the shape of our environments where we do things can transform regular things and customary acts into the stuff of human spirit, the soul of community."

We can change the very patterns or habits of our day in a way that works toward the harvest. Consider our daily routines and who we interact with. How can we greet our neighborhood with "peace" as we get our morning coffee, become present at our playgrounds, walk the streets, or eat nearby? We have been received as a part of this neighborhood and community, now we can tell them, "God's kingdom is right on your doorstep!"

May our homes become welcome centers, may our dorm rooms and classrooms become welcome centers, may our offices and workplaces become welcome centers, and may our hearts become welcome centers. If we make this a "holy habit", we will begin to gather in the "holy harvest". It all begins with the welcome and hospitality of Christ. Did you have any idea that God's kingdom was right on your doorstep?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, You are a God of hospitality; there is none like you that invites all to come, to be gathered in, both the community of faith and in you. You have invited all to your home, to your table, and to your arms. Lord, we pray that all would hear and receive this good news. Give us eyes to see the stranger as friend. Give us hearts full of love for our neighbors as well as for the strangers we meet. Help us understand what it means to love others as we love ourselves. Teach us to care in a way that strengthens those who are sick. Fill us with generosity so everyone knows your abundance. Let us be a healing balm to those who are weak and lonely and weary by offering our kindness. May we remember to listen, to smile, to offer peace to every home and every person. Inspire us to go out of our way to include those in the margins.

Help us to be welcoming and inclusive to all who come to our door and may we be encouraged to leave our doors ready to offer peace to others. Let us be your hospitality in the world.

We offer this prayer in the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, who opened the doors for everyone. Amen