

“Get Lost!”

A sermon on Matthew 10:40-42
by the Rev. Christopher W. Keating
Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
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When I was in middle school, my mother took a job with a temporary employment service. Her assignments were varied, lasting anywhere from a few weeks to several months, and included a range of businesses including a bicycle manufacturer and a brewery.

One of the more interesting employers, to me anyway, was a company which specialized in making personalized doormats. These were mail order items: people would send in order forms indicating how they wanted their doormats to read. Because of the nature of reading people’s handwriting, entering the data into their system was a tedious task. More than once the company produced doormats with the wrong name, which was a source of irritation to both the customers and to management.

With single keystroke, “Smith” was turned into “Smoth;” and “Jones” into “Jerks,” and even a few which are not suitable for use in sermons! As irritating as these mistakes were, they were also entertaining. Employees could rummage through the leftovers and take them home – which always made for a laugh in our house.

One night my mother returned from work with a huge smile and a doormat under her arm. She could hardly contain herself as she unrolled it and put it at the front door. You can imagine my father’s concern when he arrived from work to be greeted by a brand new doormat which read, “Get Lost!”

That doormat became a part of our family lore, likely because it’s message was so different from the values my parents espoused. It was a complete contradiction to the values they held about hospitality, which flowed like rushing water. All were invited to share at our family’s table. “Get lost” was not part of our vocabulary.

Nor is it part of who we are as Christ's people. As a church, Woodlawn Chapel has always worked hard at practicing the words of Jesus, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." These words have formed the heart of our aspirations to be a welcoming community. It is our narrative: we are donut eaters and cake cutters, barbecuers and potluckers. More mashed potatoes have been consumed in these square feet than any other place in Wildwood. We eat desserts first and then go back for the main course. We rise before dawn on mission trips to share breakfast, and return exhausted to share stories. We may not always practice hospitality perfectly, but we do keep trying.

A "Get Lost" doormat would be the last thing you'd find in front of Woodlawn Chapel, which is why the realities of Covid-19 have been particularly painful and perplexing. We are puzzled by an empty sanctuary. The truth it is not just the building which is empty, we feel empty as well. It may seem as though someone has put out a big "Get Lost" doormat where the welcome of Christ should be.

Sadly, the deeper truth is that many persons have always encountered "Get Lost" painted on the front doors of the churches they visit. Sometimes it is invisible paint, but the message is still there. Irish theologian Siobhan Garrigan tells the story of visiting a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland. She was greeted at the door by two women, church members, invited her into conversation. She quickly realized that their job was to quietly and quickly discern the first names of any approaching strangers. As William Goettler retells the experience,

'Hearing those names, the ushers would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and the Catherines and the Patricks, were told that they were surely in the wrong church and sent on their way.'¹

This was not a story from decades ago, and while it sounds strange, there are North American churches well versed in these sorts of practices.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me,” Jesus instructs the disciples. This is the foundational truth of what it means for the church to practice hospitality.

Jesus’ words go even further. When read in the entire context of Matthew chapter 10, we remember that this is part of Jesus’ instructions to the disciples as they begin their missionary work. They are sent out not only with instructions on how they are to practice hospitality, but primarily with the instructions of how Jesus will be present as they are *the recipients of either a warm or hateful welcome*.

That is the flipside of this text which we may miss.

In this case, Jesus is turning the church inside out. The apostles would have no problem being part of a church that couldn’t meet in a building because the focus of their mission was not to bring people into a location. There were no buildings. Jesus’ message is not about getting people into pews but is instead about sending disciples to form relationships.

The passage makes this clear: whoever welcomes *you*, whoever offers *one of these little ones* a cup of cold water will not lose their reward. Not only is Jesus offering instructions on how the church is to practice compassion and welcome, but he is assuring the disciples that as they go into the world they will be protected.

Here is our good news for a time of social distancing. Jesus sends us out to bear his word of love and promise to those who have felt excluded from church. He empowers us to bring this promise to all who might not otherwise show up in church on Sunday mornings.

We all long for the time when we will return to worship in person, but we also know that as we have been streaming our service we are welcome many more to worship than we did before. Our participation on line is growing!

The promise we receive is that in this time of increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression the church has what is needed to reach out. You have what you need to form communities of support and prayer. According to the Census Bureau, one in three Americans are showing signs of clinical depression and anxiety.² For many

² <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/ny-dick-chenev-liz-chenev-wear-a-mask-20200626-3f2l4xeyqnbidh3ftyivl2o3d4-story.html>

people, the isolating aspects of the pandemic have been intolerable. They are the ones seen “Get lost” signs everywhere.

The challenge of this passage is its call go out offering cups of cold water to little ones. Such water is not the water which comes from the top of the well. Rather, it is the water which is drawn with effort from the deepest part of the well. The cold water is the water hardest to offer.

I got to thinking about this as I re-read a passage from author Brian McLaren asks in his book “The Secret Message of Jesus.” McLaren writes, “What would happen...if we again tasted the good news of Jesus, not as a tranquilizer but as vibrant, potent new wine that filled us with joy and hope that a better world is possible? What if, intoxicated by this new wine, we threw off our inhibitions and actually began acting as if the hidden but real kingdom of God was at hand?”³

Go back and read these words of Matthew once more, and ask “What is Jesus asking of me?”⁴ Jesus is sending the church out of the building. He has called and equipped the disciples to do the work of ministry—to heal, to forgive, to restore community.

We need my parent’s old door mat—not on the outside of the building, but in the inside. We need to remember that the gospel empowers us to get lost in the world. We are the ones called to go looking for the lost sheep who has wandered off, or the son who has yet to come home. We are the ones called to help the daughter who is searching furiously for the pearl she has lost. We are the ones who are called to reach out to the anxious, the lonely, to scared youth, to persons of color, to LGBTQ individuals, to all who time and time again have knocked on doors only to be told, “Get lost.” We go to tell them, “Jesus is looking for you.” And we go with this promise: “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.”

³ Brian McLaren, “The Secret Message of Jesus,” p. 85.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5441>