Sermon, September 22, 2024

"Got Welcome?"

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

We are a culture obsessed with ranking. Top 10 lists abound. We rank our songs, our movies, our sports teams. You can head toward the bizarre in your rankings as well. How about the top 10 strange ways people in the Victorian era exercised – bet you're dying to learn that one! Ranking starts at the very beginning of life. Whose baby is cuter? Whose kid is smarter, stronger? What grades did you get in school? In adulthood, it's who's getting a promotion, a raise. Church, military, nations all have their hierarchies. Of course if there's a top ten, there's also a bottom 10 and you certainly don't want to be there.

So can you blame the disciples for arguing today behind Jesus' back about who was the greatest? If there were twelve of them, two wouldn't make the top ten, but each wanted to be #1. To this desire to be the greatest, to be on top, Jesus doesn't just take a pin, he takes a spear and pokes a giant hole in it and has the disciples and us scratching our heads. It's not about being the greatest, it's about being the servant of all. They said, "huh?" then, and too often we say "huh?" now.

The disciples in this week's story, though, don't believe that "all" is available in the kingdom of God. They don't lean into Jesus's generosity, sufficiency, and abundance. Believing that what's available to them is meager and inadequate to start with, they quarrel for first place, first dibs, first prize. In response, Jesus points them to the non-striving, un-ambitious, open-hearted trust of a young child.

Now before you go "Awwww" isn't that cute. Before you jump to immortalize this moment of Jesus taking a child in his arms on a Hallmark card or a Sunday school picture (of which there are untold multitudes), let's do a little cultural review of the place of children in the first century of the Common Era.

The scandal in our story is the presence of the child, that Jesus pays attention to this child, and his expectation that all his disciples do so. During the days of Jesus, children were considered second-class citizens, along with tax collectors and sinners. Children were considered unproductive and burdensome. Small children, especially, were more likely to contract an illness and to die. They participated in the household labor, but were not yet fully productive, and still represented another mouth to feed. For Jesus to receive a child was somehow to lower himself in the world's eyes and to be considered

foolish because of it. And what did Jesus tell us to do with children, which really means everyone right down to the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder? **WELCOME!**

Ahh, welcome – so who's welcome? Here's a sign posted in the church lobby of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community of Ottawa:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no hablo Inglés. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds. We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like our pastor who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, treehuggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junkfood eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion," we've been there too. If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church. We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts … and you!

A lot more powerful than the too trite and common phrase, "All welcome", dontcha think? The challenge though as always is not just to talk the talk but to walk the walk. I have no idea if that church in Ottawa walks the walk and I don't care a whole lot but I do care how we welcome here at St. Luke's. Do we welcome all? Do we? Not just welcome meaning you can come sit in a pew if you don't raise a ruckus. Not just meaning you can receive holy communion here, as important as that is. But living out what communion really means which is I am as interested in knowing you and talking to you as I am a person I have known for 20 years. I will learn your name and something about you. If you seem down, I may ask how you're doing. And if you give me signals that you may need a little space for a while, I'll respect that too.

And among the many sad facts of this day is that we're losing two of our best welcomers. Now John and Kathryn are going to hear many things said about them downstairs that will risk them over-inflating their egos. But one of the things I will miss is they are two of St. Luke's best welcomers and the rest of you are going to have to pick up the slack. They seem to have the knack of noticing who is new and not just saying hi but striking up a conversation.

Our gospel today as well as the baptism we are about to take part it in reinforces that welcome is at the center of the gospel and our faith. One of the little-used words that captures the spirit of Jesus best is egalitarian, a fancy six-syllable word that means Jesus accepts all people, no matter how poor or sinful, which negated the ancient Mediterranean culture's hierarchies, discriminations, and exclusions.

In our baptismal covenant, I believe the hardest question we all have to answer is "will you respect the dignity of every human being?". That's not a theoretical or abstract question, like Linus in the "Peanuts" comic strip who said, ""I love mankind... It's people I can't stand!!". It's personal, it's incarnational, it's love in action. It's likely to be the biggest challenge in Beau's life of faith and for all the rest of us as well.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me". But do we have our welcome mats out?

John and Kathryn:

Great lovers of church and community

If we are doing something here, you could always count on them to show up and participate, maybe not always in peak of health but they would be here.

They never kept their hands in their pockets, Kathryn because it's hard to play the organ or piano with her hands in her pockets but John would not wait to be asked but do things that needed to be done without asking: light the candles, ring the bell, carry the cross.

Then as I mentioned upstairs there is the welcoming.

Finally there is, yes, the ministries, Kathryn devoting her time here to music ministry.

John with leadership on Vestry. John also was the convenor of the "men's breakfast" providing an occasion for us men who may not have been naturally as social to connect. I should also mention that John laughed the loudest, or maybe was even the only one laughing, at the jokes in my sermones so someone is definitely going to have to take on that role.