

PROPER EIGHT, PENTECOST 5, YEAR A, JULY 2, 2023

On this fourth of July weekend if I were to ask you what one word would describe what the fourth of July means I believe the word you would probably come up with is freedom. Freedom is a powerful and important concept. Usually, freedom is from something to freedom for something. We were freed from England's monarchy to be free to establish a democratic system. But I believe over the centuries we have appropriated the word freedom to prioritize our own self-interest. This is very different from the biblical understanding of freedom.

For the Israelites they were freed from bondage in Egypt in order to be free to worship and serve God and God's purposes. It was freedom from oppression in order to be free to worship and serve a loving, gracious and welcoming God. They understood that freedom is not about what best serves you but emphasizes that freedom must include others. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments it was to set out a framework by which we would come to understand and embody this freedom, what it meant and how it looked to be, not just in right relationship with God but in a right relationship with one another. The biblical imperative God gave to Moses is "you shall love and care for strangers because you were once strangers in Egypt. With biblical freedom comes the command to welcome one another which leads to freedom for all.

In the Gospel today we are told that Jesus said, whoever welcomes you welcomes me. I think most of us somewhere in our homes have a welcome mat or sign that is inviting. What does it really mean to welcome someone into your home? Does it mean it's nice to have someone over for a meal or social time and conversation or does it mean you are willing to let anyone into your home that might be deemed unacceptable to some?

I remember, growing up, that anyone and everyone was welcomed at our table to share whatever meal we had and if they needed a place to stay we found room for them. It wasn't unusual to have unannounced guests at our dinner table. But I really understood what is to welcome someone into your home one Saturday in 1962 when my father was building an addition to our house. Two African American men that my father worked with were hired to help him. When it came time for lunch my mother called everyone to come inside and get something to eat. The two African American men told my mother they would eat outside as they did not want to upset any of the neighbors if they stepped foot into our house. I can't repeat what my mother actually said about any neighbor who would criticize her for who she invited into our house as it was rare to hear her use colorful language but the gentlemen did come in to eat. Early on I saw what it means to welcome everyone into your home.

The Episcopal church prides itself on its sign, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." What exactly are we welcoming people too? The word welcome is an active verb which means we are to be agents of that verb. What does it mean to welcome someone into our church community?

When Jesus sent out his followers on a mission into the community he warned them that they would be welcomed by some and rejected by others. The whole point of their mission was to invite people into a new way of life - life that showed love and compassion toward all people. It was the kind of life that they saw in Jesus. It was a life that wasn't afraid to cross the barriers that divided people. They saw him reach out to

tax collectors and sinners who were despised by the majority. He welcomed the Samaritans and gentiles who they had no dealings with. He conversed with women who men were not allowed to speak to in public He healed the sick who were kept on the fringe of society. He touched the lepers who were untouchable. Some people could embrace this new humanity that they saw in Jesus because it gave their lives meaning, direction and passion. It was what they were looking for and hoping to find. However, for others this way of life was a threat to their comfort zone. This life of giving to others and connecting with people who they thought were below their station in life was a slap in the face to their beliefs. They would not welcome this group who were inviting them to become part of this threatening lifestyle.

The question before us is, "Are we willing to welcome Jesus and his way of life?" We may call ourselves Christians but are we Christ-like? There is a big difference. A recent study says that most people don't attend church because of irrelevance, hypocrisy and moral failure. As one respondent said, The church is irrelevant so why would anyone go because it's full of hypocrisy and just look at the moral failure of so many of its leaders. The study also said legitimate doubt was not welcomed, community was lacking and they really didn't understand or could find God they could connect with.

There are many things that the church has done or ignored in history in the name of Christianity that has not been Christ-like. There was a time in the Church when slavery was never questioned. For years the church lived comfortably with prejudice based on race, gender and sexual orientation. Christians have been consumed with hatred against people of other denominations and religions. Church leaders have persecuted, tortured and even put to death people who disagreed with the church's official positions. Massacres have taken place by upstanding religious people in the name of Christ. Anti-Semitism has been encouraged for centuries. So, even though people have called themselves Christians they have not necessarily welcomed the Christ-like lifestyle. They have, in fact, rejected it altogether. They have been more concerned with power and control than "giving up self" for the sake of others. It's no wonder people see Christians as hypocrits.

This is not to say that other religious groups have not persecuted Christians the same way and for the same reasons – they have and continue to do so as do Christians. However, we need to acknowledge our un-Christ like past and present and move towards being the church Christ calls us to be. A welcoming church embraces the unlovable, the unlikely, the despised, the poor, the disenfranchised and everyone you think doesn't belong here. A welcoming Christian doesn't think twice about who the person is based on gender, race, culture, or religion, they only see another child of God. The welcoming Christian gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.

Let me tell you a story that emphasizes this point. Nine years ago the CNBC news anchor Lawrence O'Donnell and his brother were seriously injured in a head on collision while riding in a taxi in the British Virgin Islands. They were both air transported to hospitals in New York and Boston where they underwent numerous surgeries. Lawrence spent quite some time in the hospital recuperating and when he returned to his anchor position, he thanked a number of people who helped him recuperate. He said this about the nurses who cared for him; the great ones are the ones who couldn't do the work they do, they couldn't do it the way they do it, if the motivation didn't come from the goodness of their hearts. But the one nurse who spent

the most time with him and took care of him was named Shannon Lawrence. Yes, he was intrigued that his first name was her last name but that's not what piqued his interest about her. He said having grown up in an Irish household he was intrigued how this African American woman came to be named Shannon. She told Lawrence that her father was wounded in World War II and sent to England to be treated and recuperate. None of the English nurses would touch any of the African American soldiers. Then along came an Irish nurse who nursed her father back to health. Her name was Shannon and so he named his daughter for that nurse who understood what it means to welcome another human being and give them a cup of cold water. She in turn became a nurse and has spent her life sharing the same healing kindness and grace that her father's nurse did.

What about us? Are we welcoming to the loving compassionate life-style of the new humanity found in Jesus? Are we setting examples for our children and grandchildren what it means to be a welcoming caring person and community?

To welcome Jesus is to welcome his life in us. This weekend as we celebrate our freedom it is an important thing to celebrate and embrace for everybody. But I invite you to embrace more fully the deeper biblical meaning of freedom: freedom from all kinds of bondage; freedom to live together; freedom to serve one another. When we do that we are truly a welcoming presence of being Christ like to the world. It's easier said than done but then again our reward is a life worth living. Amen.