

WORSHIP

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When Welcome is a Challenge

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Matthew 5:43-48

As a preacher, I am always on the lookout for stories and experiences that might help to illustrate a sermon. I find inspiration in lots of places. But nothing ever hits me as profoundly as a sermon illustration that happens right in front of my eyes. A little over a week ago, such a thing literally showed up on my doorstep.

It was just after 7:30 one morning and Caroline and I were headed out the door- it was my turn to drop her off at school. I took one step out onto the porch and suddenly realized that there was someone there – a man was asleep on the loveseat. I pushed Caroline back inside the house and called for Bill, who fortunately was right in the kitchen. “There’s someone sleeping on our porch,” I said to him. Incredulous, he came out and saw what I had seen.

As Caroline and I stepped off of the porch and headed to the car, I turned back around to watch as Bill sat down in the chair across from the sleeping man, leaned forward, and gently but firmly said, “good morning.” The man stirred and Bill asked him if he knew where he was. The man struggled to respond, and he was clearly in an impaired state. As the man sat up and began to put on his shoes, Bill went back into the house, and returned with a bottle of water and a bag of snacks. He gave them to the man, who took them and then went on his way.

It was a strange experience, to say the least. No one ever expects to find another person asleep on their porch, and there are multiple reasons why such a situation can be frightening. And there are just as many ways in which we can respond.

What I saw from my husband that morning was the embodiment of what I was already reflecting on for this sermon. His gentle, gracious interaction with the stranger on our porch exhibited welcome and kindness in a profound way, in a challenging and unpredictable situation. He could so easily have been defensive, angry or aggressive. That would probably have accomplished the same thing. Instead, he chose to see and treat this stranger as a



fellow human being, someone worthy of dignity and respect. And that made all the difference.

It would have had an impact on me anytime, but the fact that it happened in the midst of our series on Welcome was not lost on me. This is the third sermon in our Welcome series, though based on this morning's passage, you might have thought that we were switching to a series on challenging scripture passages. This passage usually shows up on those lists, often right up near the top.

It's a section from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, the conclusion of what scholars call the "antitheses"- statements by Jesus that begin with, "you have heard it said" and then reciting an ancient law, followed with, "but I tell you" and a command to take that teaching another step or two. The section ends with the phrase we just heard, "Be perfect," Jesus says, "just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In his reflection on this text, New Testament Scholar Eric Barreto describes how many are tempted to explain away these words, claiming Jesus couldn't possibly have meant to say perfect, and didn't really expect us to do all the things that he said before that. But Barreto embraces the challenge in the antitheses and the call to perfection, asserting that, "[Jesus] is not negating these teachings but calling all their adherents to embody their demands in concrete and radical, practical and transformative ways. In short, Jesus is bringing these laws to life in his time and place."

Jesus lived and breathed in a particular time and place, among people whose lives were shaped by laws and traditions that came from a different time and place. In order to get through to them with his transformative message of love and grace, he had to first get their attention. Talking about loving their enemies was certainly a way to do that. Enemies were plentiful for the people of Israel, and to hear that they were included among the neighbors that God called us to love had to have been jarring for those seated at Jesus' feet. It's jarring for us today, too.

As I mentioned, we're in the midst of a sermon series on Welcome, which is the theme for our stewardship season this year. Welcome is such a – well, welcoming – word. It conjures images of open doors and cups of coffee, smiling faces and warm embraces. In the words of Martha Stewart, "it's a good thing."

But, like just about everything, this good thing has a shadow side. Welcome- otherwise known as hospitality, kindness, friendship, love- is something I believe we all want to offer, something we know God calls us to offer, but are we really supposed to do it all the time? Even if we don't have what the dictionary would define as a true enemy, there are certainly plenty of people in all of our lives that stretch the concept of welcome to uncomfortable proportions.



What about those people who are mean to us? What about people who disagree with us, or don't like us, or heaven forbid, those who actively seek to hurt us? What then? Does Jesus really mean that we are to be welcoming to them too?

“Love your enemy,” Jesus said, “and pray for those who persecute you.”

It's pretty clear. But that doesn't make it easy.

When someone doesn't look like us and doesn't act like us, doesn't sound like us and doesn't vote like us;

When we've been told certain things about another group of people or we or someone we love has been hurt by someone who represents another group of people;

When what someone says threatens our way of life, or their actions confuse or frighten us,

It can be a real challenge to extend the kind of welcome Jesus calls us to, in this passage, and throughout his teaching.

At those times, it is worth remembering that nowhere in scripture does God tell us that a life of discipleship will be easy. But throughout scripture, God promises to be with us as we seek to follow the path that he has set for us.

Not too long ago, another profound example of the challenge and beauty of what it can look like to extend welcome when it is difficult came to me from a rather unlikely source – reality television. *Queer Eye* is a Netflix reboot of the wildly popular Bravo show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* which aired from 2003-2007. The original was a pop culture phenomenon as it placed five homosexual men, affectionately called the Fab Five, at the center of a reality makeover show for the first time on American television.

The reboot introduces a new Fab Five- each of whom is an expert in a particular area - grooming, food, wardrobe, interior design, and lifestyle, who spend a week with an individual – often but not always a heterosexual man, getting to know them, and, in their terminology, giving them a “make better.”

Now, I have always loved a good makeover show, but that's not what hooked me with *Queer Eye*. At a time when just about everything on television, from sitcoms to movies to the news, seems filled with conflict and crassness and trouble, this show is truly a breath of fresh air. The Fab Five interact with one another, and with their makeover subjects with what can only be described as joyful love. The show is unashamedly positive, happy and fun.

But that doesn't mean that they don't tackle real issues. These are five gay men interacting with mostly heterosexual men and their families and friends in the South. There are challenges in each episode, and they don't shy away from them.



One episode in particular stood out to me. Cory, the makeover subject, is a former Marine, husband and father of two, who serves as a police officer in Winder, GA. The episode opens, as they all do, with the Fab Five in a car, on their way to meet their subject. In this particular episode, Karamo Brown, the sole African American member of the group, is driving. Suddenly, there are blue lights in the rearview mirror. They're being pulled over.

Because they are being filmed, the men had left all their belongings in another car with the producers, and so Karamo doesn't have his license to give the officer when he requests it. The officer asks him to step out of the car, and it is clear that all five of the men are worried and concerned. After another minute or so of questions, the officer reveals that Cory, the makeover subject, is his friend, and that he is actually the one who nominated him. The tension in the scene dissolves into grateful laughter and the officer provides the men a police escort to Cory's home.

Later in the episode, Karamo and Cory find themselves in the car together navigating Atlanta traffic, which gives them time to talk. At first, they do what most people do – they talk about the things they have in common- military service, the way they were raised, their common love for the music of Wu Tang Clan.

Those connections made, they venture into tougher waters. Karamo brings up the fear he felt when he was pulled over a few days earlier, confessing to Cory that, as a black man, he feels great fear in the presence of the police. Cory listens to him, allowing him to express his thoughts and feelings before responding. And when he does, it is with equal honesty and no defensiveness. He talks about the inherent dangers in his job and his frustration at being lumped in with a small group of people who act in inappropriate, dangerous ways.

Both men express how they don't want to be judged by their skin color or by their uniform, both agree that there are genuine concerns and emotions on both sides of the issue. They don't come to any groundbreaking conclusions, but as they talk, they acknowledge each other's stories. And that has an impact on both men.

Towards the end of the conversation, Cory says, "if we could all sit down and have a conversation like we just did, things would be a lot better in our country. Everybody wants to talk, but nobody wants to listen."

It's an incredibly real, honest and powerful moment. In their willingness to talk openly, and to listen compassionately, Karamo and Cory each learned something. And, perhaps most importantly, they forged a lasting relationship that otherwise could not have happened. At the end of the show, they shared how they continue to communicate to this day, texting about matters both silly and profound.

In reflecting upon that interaction, Karamo said, "1 conversation isn't going to solve everything, but it's a start.' But imagine what would happen if each of us committed to



having one conversation, one interaction with someone who is very different from ourselves. What might change if we all sought out, instead of avoiding, tough conversations with people with whom we disagree?

Being welcoming isn't always easy. Opening up to, and being open to, someone who is different from you, can be incredibly hard. But it is the only way that we can live and thrive as human beings on this earth together. And we have to be willing to do it over and over and over again.

Christian perfection isn't about having all the right answers or never making mistakes. It isn't about being better than everyone else, either. The strongest, most undeniable thread running throughout scripture- both the old testament and the new- is love. As disciples of Christ, we are called to love God and to love one another over and above every other thing we are to do. In this do we find the type of perfection about which Jesus speaks. Christian perfection is love, plain and simple.

And that, my friends, is radical. Because this world wants so badly for us to believe that the only way for us to get ahead is for someone else to lose, and that we need to shore up our power and deny others theirs. But that strategy didn't work in Jesus' time and it doesn't work in ours either. The power that could not be conquered by the cross is the power that sustains our lives, calling us to see the image of God in all we encounter, extending welcome even when it isn't easy, promising that there is enough love to go around, and that the more we share, the more we will all have.

Thanks be to God.

