

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I've said this several times, so you may be sick of hearing it, but I grew up in quite a small town. There was a gas station, a diner, a video store, and inexplicably a Greek-owned Italian restaurant, mainly known for its hamburgers. The whole town existed between two exits on a smallish highway. And so, as you can imagine, our church was all of twenty people meeting in a storefront. And, when I was in high school, I was the only kid there my age.

When I was at church one day, I noticed that someone had put up a flier advertising a summer camp for young people who wanted to be leaders in church, and I thought that sounded pretty great. So I registered, and a few weeks later, I was on my way to a pretty remote camp with a bunch of other teenagers on a lake in the middle of nowhere.

What I didn't know is this: all of the other kids who signed up signed up with a group. And so, when I walked into the camp, it became quickly clear to me that I was the only person there who didn't know anyone. I was the only one who didn't have a buddy of some kind.

This is hard at any age, and it's particularly hard at 15. I remember getting my rooming assignment from the camp director, as she kind of pointed in the direction of my cabin. And then two pretty miraculous things happened in short order: a kid named Brian came up to me and said he'd show me the cabin. And then after that, a young woman noticed I was alone at the first big group session and invited me to sit with her and her friends.

I know this story is a little simple. I even worry that it's sort of trite. So what? Someone was nice to a kid at camp? This isn't the stuff that usually inspires literature or art or cinema.

But here's the thing: I actually think that at the center of this little camp story is the heart of Jesus' gospel message. Today, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is teaching his disciples. And he says this: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." To welcome a stranger to your table is to welcome God to your table. This is a radical reversal of some of our more tribal impulses. It's pretty easy to search for God among those who look like us, think like us, are related to us, are our own age, are our own religion, or even have a similar stock portfolio as us. And while those things may be understandable, they are not divine.

What is divine, what is in resonance with the nature of God, is welcome. There's a lovely line from the letter to the Hebrews that says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." I love the idea that there are angels walking around, waiting to be welcomed into a home or a summer camp or a restaurant or a church. Is it true? I have no idea. But is it compelling? Absolutely.

If welcome is so needed and so simple, and if welcome is part of the Christian call, what do you suppose the barriers are? Why do we sometimes choose not to welcome? I imagine there are

some really big reasons that we all know about: xenophobia, racism, classism, sexism, urban/rural divides, regional temperaments, political divisions, often with a dollop of white supremacy thrown on top. This is all garbage that is as old as people, and I know these are barriers to welcome that we are all aware of and that we work to combat as a church. Still, today, I want to talk about a barrier that's a little different. This barrier isn't one of the huge ones in my list—we will get to those in other sermons—but this barrier is everywhere, and I think you'll relate to it.

In the 70s, a couple of psychologists at Princeton created a study. They decided to observe a group of masters-level students studying to become pastors. They asked them to give a lecture on the story of the good samaritan far on the other side of campus. Some participants were told they were late to their lecture, and some were told they had plenty of time to get there. What the participants didn't know is that on the way to give their lecture, they would run into an actor who was pretending to be in an immediate need. The question of the study was this: would religious people who were actively studying a religious story about how to help those in need, actually stop and help those in need? Well, some did and some didn't.

But the finding was really interesting: the strongest indicator that someone would stop and help was actually whether or not they were in a hurry. Those who thought they were late to their lecture tended not to stop. Those who thought they had a lot of time, tended to stop.

So, what does this have to do with us? I think that the radical welcome that we are seeking to create at St. Mark's and that the gospel story teaches us today requires some time. We can't come in from over-programmed and over-burdened lives and expect to have the right energy to be able to help the stranger. Or put another way, before we can take time to heal others, we have to heal ourselves. This can be hard for Christians—and midwesterners—to hear. We are not always great at taking the time and the space that we need to get centered in love and centered with God. But, at least as I am reading it, that's exactly what we must do if we want to live out the call of the gospel. In AA, they sometimes use the phrase "hurt people hurt people." And I suppose the opposite of that is that healed people heal people. You won't be much good as God's welcome wagon if you don't have any gas in the tank. To tend to your spiritual and emotional needs as a community is one of the most important things we can do, because only then will we be able to turn our attention to the welcome God is asking of us.

So, slow down my friends. Say your prayers. Observe the Sabbath. Read spiritual literature. Spend time in God's creation. Be open to awe and wonder. You are called to offer God's radical welcome to those you meet. You are called to entertain the angels. Amen.