

## GREAT WELCOME

Mark 9:30-37

We enter *Great Welcome Sunday* this morning with the Gospel picture of Jesus welcoming a little child in the midst of his adult inner circle of disciples. Unlike our child-oriented culture, where children have a prominent place in society, in 33 AD children had no prominence. They were nonentities. A young child had no reason to be near a great teacher like Jesus. Children were to stay with the women and keep themselves out of the way. So, by welcoming a small child in their midst Jesus was doing a radical thing.

Jesus brought the child in during an awkward silence. He had just asked his disciples what they had been arguing about on the way they had no answer to his question. For along the way they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest. Despite proving yet again that they didn't have a clue, even Jesus' disciples had enough sense to realize that an argument about which of them was the greatest was probably not what Jesus wanted them to be doing. So they met his question with embarrassed silence. Jesus embraced the little boy or girl. "*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name,*" he told them, "*welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*"

What a great passage for *Great Welcome Sunday*. We are reminded of the kind of radical welcome Jesus gave to all, particularly the weak and powerless and we are reminded that we are to follow the example that Jesus set.

The disciples themselves also received a kind of great welcome in this passage. For in setting this example for them and in reminding them of his purpose Jesus was welcoming them back into his fellowship, welcoming them back into his purpose, his mission.

What kind of welcome did Jesus give to anyone who came to him in need? I can't think of anyone he turned away. The leper who broke all the rules governing leprosy and knelt before Jesus begging him to make him clean, Jesus touched – the very thing you were never supposed to do (touch a leper) – and healed him (Mark 1:40-42). He welcomed a woman known only as a sinner who crashed the dinner party of Simon the Pharisee to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair (Luke 7:36-50). And he forgave her sins. He healed the sick, he cast out the demons. We don't have a record of anyone whom he turned away. Even the Syro-Phoenecian woman who Jesus at first denied because she was not among God's chosen people to whom Jesus was sent, engaged him with her amazing faith that *even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from the table*; he recognized her faith and healed her (Mark 7:25-30).

What kind of welcome does Jesus give to you and me and to the whole world to whom he was sent? "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" (Jn. 3:16) He welcomes us just as we are. He heals us. He forgives us. He frees us to live new lives in him. He makes

us his own. That's a pretty radical welcome. I'm reminded of a verse from the old gospel song, *Just as I am*.

*Just as I am, thou wilt receive  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve  
Because thy promise I believe  
O Lamb of God I come, I come*

But here we see how the disciples went wrong. They were basing their place in God's Kingdom on entitlement. After all they were Jesus' closest followers. They had a right to have an important place in his kingdom. It was their prerogative. *Not so* Jesus was telling them. True greatness in his kingdom comes through service. "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all,*" he told them. Our place in his Kingdom is based on our need of him. We have no claim other than our sinfulness, our brokenness, our great need. That is the basis upon which we are welcomed into God's Kingdom. Any right, any prerogative, any privilege we have as Jesus' followers is the prerogative, the right, the privilege to follow where Jesus led the way, to serve as he served, to love as he loved, to welcome others as he welcomed us.

So, on this Great Welcome Sunday how are we to be welcoming? In our mission we state that

*St. John's is a wonderfully diverse community of faith rooted in the heart of downtown Stamford, where the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a new humanity in Christ. We embrace this vision by **welcoming** all people to*

- *Celebrate God in the beauty of holiness through the richness of Anglican worship and glorious music;*
- *(to) strengthen their spiritual journeys through prayer, study and scripture; and*
- *(to) serve as instruments of God's peace, justice and love in the world.*

So – we welcome people through the *beauty of holiness* in our worship. We welcome people through offering opportunities to learn and grow and deepen our faith. We welcome people through opportunities to serve others and work for justice and peace. We welcome people by inviting them into the heart of Jesus' life and mission.

Jesus welcomed the little child. He welcomes us. How can we be welcoming?

- We can start by wearing name tags! Nothing is more welcoming than helping people know names. Wear a name tag!
- Today we are having a *Ministry Fair* where every ministry group is represented. Visit the table to learn about our ministries and sign-up to take part in one. You can be welcoming by being an usher or a greeter, by joining the Newcomers Committee, or helping out with parish Fellowship.

- We can welcome our children as Jesus did by supporting them, volunteering to be a leader, a door person, or help out in a variety of ways.
- Introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Follow up the conversation with a brief note. Keep in touch. Be a friend.

We are called to a ministry of radical welcome. There are things people tell us we can do to be more welcoming. A seminary classmate who shared in the funeral service for Richard Schuster recently had hip replacement surgery. She told me that not only were our bathrooms not handicap assessable, our stalls don't have hand rails that would allow her to lower herself onto the toilet seat. That's not very welcoming. Our parking is often hard for people to find. Our building can be hard for people to find. There are many things we can and should be doing – especially as we plan our parish renovation – to make St. John's a more welcoming environment.

How also can we follow Jesus' example and welcome the powerless, the least, the last and the lost? Here are a few creative ways that have recently come to my attention to welcome children. The Rev. Judith Alexis who is coming at the end of this month to be priest in charge of L'Eglise de L'Epiphanie told me of her desire to be a foster mother to older teenagers. That's a difficult age that often gets neglected in the system. Karen Halac, our Children and Families Ministry Leader, is planning to bring our *J2A* class to *St. Luke's Lifeworks* to join her in tutoring and supporting some of the young children in their program. Our mission trip to Haiti – whether or not you are able to go – you can still support the school and the medical mission that we are helping sponsor in the village of L'Acul. You can sponsor a child for a year of education. There are many creative ways we can welcome and support children and people in need. Volunteer, contribute, be an advocate, get involved in any of hundreds of charities. Remember Jesus' key to greatness: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

Find your place of welcome in God's love and embrace others in need with the great welcome with which God has welcomed you. And let us especially welcome one another in love on this *Great Welcome Sunday*.