

- When have you been made to feel UNWELCOME? What happened? How were you treated?
- When have you been made to feel WELCOME? What was different? What was said / done to let you know you were WELCOME in that place... with those people?

Now... put yourself on the other side...

- How do you WELCOME others? Visitors / guests? Strangers?
- On a scale of 1-10, how WELCOMING are you? are we as a group?
 - Would others agree with your assessment?
- Is everyone WELCOMED the same?
 - What if they say things we don't want to hear / don't agree with? What if they come with a different biblical understanding or political leaning?
 - What if they look different or are dressed differently?
 - What if they bring new ideas / new ways of doing things... that "upset" our normal?
- Can you think of anyone you would NOT WELCOME? Why? What do you think Jesus would think about that?

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," Jesus says, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

"Whoever welcomes a prophet... whoever welcomes a righteous person... whoever [welcomes] and gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones," Jesus says, "none of these will lose their reward...."

Clearly, WELCOME—how others WELCOME us... and how we WELCOME others—is at the heart of these 3 short verses.

- When others WELCOME us, as Jesus' disciples—they WELCOME Christ.
- When we WELCOME others—be it a prophet in our midst... a righteous person... or a "little one"—we WELCOME Christ.
- And when we WELCOME Christ—we WELCOME God!

So, I guess we need to ask ourselves:

- What does it mean to be WELCOMED by others?
- What does it mean to WELCOME others?

As far as I can tell, what Jesus is talking about here is much more than just being friendly... smiling / saying "hi." WELCOME means to be received / to make room for... to enter into relationship with... to be impacted by / maybe even changed by those relationships...

Jesus makes it clear that people are supposed to see "Jesus" in each of us who represent him... in each of us who proclaim the gospel truth in and through our words and actions.

In one sense, we would be happy if that actually happened, right? If what people saw in us was a radical consistency between the Jesus we proclaim and ourselves – our way of being in this world / our speech and our actions.

But, as the earlier sections of Matthew 10 have made painfully clear, those who represent Jesus... can (and probably should) expect rejection or trouble / to not be WELCOMED by many in this world.

It's true that some people get rejected because of the un-Christ-like way they behave / speak—because of the disparity between who Jesus is / what Jesus says and does... and who they are (their words and actions / way of being in this world). It's equally true that others get rejected precisely because they are so much like Jesus—because they proclaim the gospel truth... and try to live / act and speak as Jesus wants them to.

When we find ourselves (as Jesus' disciples) on the receiving end of criticism / rejection /not being WELCOMED – the first thing to consider is where the offense lies:

- Is it our un-Christ-like behavior and speech that is putting people off... the inconsistency between what we profess and how we live?
- Or is it the offense of the gospel, itself?

Then again, when we are WELCOMED / accepted and well-received, the question is equally valid in the opposite direction:

- *Why* are we (and our message) being accepted / WELCOMED?
- Have we presented the truth of the gospel such that people are really seeing “Jesus” in us? or have we watered down or twisted the gospel in hope that we (our message) will be more popular?

Whether we are WELCOMED or rejected by people, the question is the same:

- Is it Jesus (and his message) that is being WELCOMED or rejected?
- Or is it something in us (our speech / actions)—that is inconsistent with the Jesus we proclaim and say we follow... that is the issue?

Think back. Is there anyone that Jesus didn't WELCOME? Jesus WELCOMED everybody—especially the “outsiders” ... the cast-aside... the lonely... the hurting... the “socially unacceptable.” In fact, that (more than almost anything else) is what got him in trouble with the religious leaders of his day. The only people that Jesus ever really lost his temper with... were those who went around drawing lines in the sand / putting up boundaries and barriers to exclude / reject / not WELCOME some people. “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites,*” he yelled, “*for you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 23:13).

The truth is, Jesus threw the gates of heaven open to anyone who would enter. “*Those who are well have no need of a physician,*” he said, “*but those who are sick*” (Luke 5:31). It didn't matter what they did for a living (or if you had a job). It didn't matter what country they were born in / the color of their skin. It didn't matter whether they were male or female / rich or poor. “*There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,*” Jesus says, “*than over ninety-nine righteous people!*” (Luke 15:7). And Jesus warned everybody else to back off when it comes to standing in judgment of others: “*Take the log out of your own eye,*” he said, “*before you start trying to take the speck out of someone else's!*”

That's Jesus' way of reminding all of us—as if we could forget—that our relationship with him starts at the foot of the cross... just like everybody else. We have been set free from the power of sin and death and everything that messes up our lives—through Jesus death and resurrection... what Jesus did for us! But that doesn't mean that the struggle is over. We know, all too well, that we are *simul justus et peccator*—we are *simultaneously saint and sinner*. We are, at the same time, holy and sinful.

We have been set free from the power of sin... *and* we are up to our ears in it in the same moment. We are saved... *and* we need, every day, to be washed clean in the waters of baptism and set free all over again. It isn't as easy as saying that, because I am saved / because Jesus died for me, I don't have to worry... everything is beautiful and life is perfect. It just isn't. Life more complicated than that—even life with God! We do so many remarkable / courageous things (as Jesus disciples)... *and* at the same time, we fall short in so many ways... every day (all of us!). We are just as likely to run away as we are to take a stand... to lie as we are to tell the truth... to gossip as we are to give of ourselves. Too often, we say one thing... and do another. We are careless and selfish and self-centered...

But Jesus still loves us... Jesus still WELCOMES us... and that makes all the difference! Jesus opened his arms up wide – on the cross... to WELCOME every sinner who comes to him—every single *simul justus et peccator* one of us! Paul knew this, and that's why he challenged the church in Rome to “WELCOME one another... just as Christ has WELCOMED you” (Romans 15:7).

Dear friends, when others WELCOME us (and the gospel message we live and proclaim)... they WELCOME Jesus.

To WELCOME another—prophet or a righteous person... is to WELCOME Jesus. To give even a cup of cold water to a “little one” (= one who is in need)... is to minister to Jesus.

“Even a cup of cold water”—it seems like a little thing, doesn't it?!

So often we think that discipleship—following Jesus / ministering in his name—requires huge sacrifice on our part / involves doing big, impactful things... and sometimes it does. But here, Jesus seems to say that sometimes being faithful to our call really is nothing more than:

- giving someone in need a cup of cold water...
- delivering groceries to someone who is “at risk” and needs to stay home...
- thanking a law enforcement officer / someone in the military for their service...
- lending a friend / neighbor a helping hand, a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on...
- speaking up for someone being discriminated against...
- volunteering to help with a Habitat house build...
- supporting one of the many social service agencies of our church / community that serve the “little ones” in our midst / “the least of these” (ie., Lutheran World Relief; the local food pantry or homeless shelter, etc.)

All of these are small gestures, on the surface; but in the kingdom of God, there are no small gestures... that are done in faith. Each and every act of kindness / generosity has an impact far beyond what we imagine / see.

As Jesus disciples, my friends, we have the opportunity to make a difference in the world – each and every day... wherever we may be—the discipleship of everyday faith.

“Even a cup of cold water...” When I hear this phrase, I can't help but think of Matthew 25—Jesus' parable of the last judgment. On judgment day, all of humanity is separated into two categories: the sheep and the goats ... the righteous and the unrighteous.

The only distinguishing characteristic between the two groups is how they treated “the little ones”—the vulnerable / those in need. Both the sheep and the goats discover that Christ was located in the needy they encountered over their lifetimes.

- To the sheep—the righteous—Jesus said, *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...”*
- To the goats—the unrighteous—Jesus said, *“I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me...”*

It really brings the message home, doesn't it?! In both of these readings from Matthew, we are reminded that Jesus is ever-present.

- He is ever-present in the faithful—those who represent him / who proclaim, through our words and actions, the truth of the gospel.
- He is ever-present in “the little ones” / “the least, the lost, and the forgotten”—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned...

Jesus is ever-present—in you... in me... and in those around us. That's *why* the way we are WELCOMED (or not)... the way we WELCOME others (or not) is so important... because in so doing, Jesus, our Lord, is WELCOMED (or not)...

How different would our lives / our ministry be if we all took seriously the understanding that we don't just represent ourselves... but that we represent Jesus—the One we profess to follow and serve—every day / everywhere we go?

How different would our lives / our ministry be if we all took seriously the understanding that we are Christ's presence in the world? That the way we treat each other—believers / non-believers, alike—is the way we are treating Jesus.

What would happen if we all truly believed that we bear Christ (his presence) to every person we encounter... in every home, workplace, or neighborhood we enter?

What would happen if we all saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of mercy and grace... every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ's love and wide WELCOME?

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus says, *“and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*