

Welcome



Sharing in God's Greeting

A Four Session Study for Faith Teams

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

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Introduction to the series

Colonial Williamsburg is a special place to visit. This historic town, which is located on over three-hundred acres, was once the seat of government for the Virginia Colony. Currently, there are eighty-eight original 18th-century structures. Surrounding these buildings are hundreds of houses, shops, and public out-buildings reconstructed on their original foundations.

Growing up on the east coast, thanks to my parents and grandparents, I went to Colonial Williamsburg more than once. Walking down the broad streets and narrow alleyways, it was like I went back in time. Even as an adult, this experience remains rather neat. In the years since my childhood, I have returned and brought my family. There is always something to discover and learn.

I'm not sure on which Colonial Williamsburg visit it was that I first noticed the pineapples. They are everywhere. From decorations on doors and signage to architectural features on buildings, you will see pineapples of various sizes. Although the climate of the state of Virginia is warmer than New Jersey, it is far from being tropical. When I think about pineapples, I think palm trees, islands, and warm breezes.

I learned that the use of pineapples in colonial decor was a symbol of hospitality. It harkens back to the Spanish explorers that 'discovered' pineapples on their 15th-century voyages. They brought the sweet fruit back to Europe. Though most of them were rotten after the long sea voyage, the ones that made the journey went to royalty. Quickly, pineapples became a sign of wealth and status. The rich build special hothouses (called 'pineries') on their estates in England so they could serve pineapple to their privileged guests. By the time of Williamsburg's construction, the pineapple represented welcome and appeared throughout the homes, taverns, and inns of the colonial city.

To this day, pineapples are used as symbols of hospitality in the industry that topped five-hundred Billion dollars in 2018. According to the folks that keep track of such things, the travel and tourism industry is now over ten percent of the global Gross Domestic Product. It is expected to grow in the coming years.

Hospitality is a big business. It has grown from sharing a hot meal, a tankard of ale, and a place to sleep in a historic Virginia inn to opulent luxuries available without restriction to the rich and famous around the world. Like the aristocrats of old, who ate their rare pineapples in affluence, hospitality is available at a price to those who can afford the expense. It is a transactional experience.

Although I don't consider myself wealthy, I have a lot more resources at my disposal than most of the world's population. That is a statement that bears truth for many who live in suburban communities. Although we may not feel wealthy, if you took your family on vacation this past year, or you have been

able to drive in a late model car, or you buy a fancy coffee on the way to a job that pays above \$10,000 a year, then you have more financial resources than more than half the world's population. You are also part of the target audience for the lucrative hospitality industry.

Over the next four Faith Chats, our discussions will depart from transactional understandings and look at hospitality through a relational lens. We begin with grounding hospitality in the abundance of God's gracious welcome of all people. Isaiah's vision of a feast where you can quench your thirst and eat your fill without a price is compelling.

The WELCOME series will then explore the origins of hospitality as the "love of the stranger." Jesus's ministry and table fellowship practices will influence the direction in which we are heading. Jesus invites his followers (way back then and today) to enter into the abundance of God's hospitality as a way of interacting with each other and the world. Service and sacrifice become determinants of greatness with the community of Christ. Lastly, we will look at our welcome as an opportunity to interact with the God that lives beyond our comfort zones and sacred places.

I look forward to the journey that lies ahead of us. Reclaiming hospitality as a Christian value and way of life is critical work for us to do. As the economic gap increases between the wealthy and the poor, Christians must give witness to God's welcome that values all life regardless of financial worth. We need to counteract the worldly wisdom and practices of pineapples that reserve hospitality for those who can afford it. Jesus invites us to embrace a servant-minded and outward-focused approach to living that is inclusive and far-reaching. As we follow Jesus, we will not only share God's greeting with others; we will put ourselves in a place where we will encounter Christ in the face of the stranger.

In Christ's Light,

Pastor Walt

Bible Study Session One: The Abundance of God

Gathering Together - (10 minutes: 0:00- 0:10)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, bless our time together with your presence. Help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (5 minutes: 0:10- 0:15)

It has happened a couple of times to me. Perhaps it has also happened to you. I'm out somewhere, and I see the rare sign in a shop window - CASH ONLY. In these days of credit cards, I don't usually have any dollars in my wallet. I try to keep an emergency-Hamilton folded behind my medical insurance card - 'just in case.' But sometimes, I spend the presidential "Broadway sensation " and forget to replenish him. If the store requires cash, I'm without currency.

To be thirsty and not able to buy a drink is not good.

The experience of not having enough money on hand provides me a glimpse into the struggle of those who struggle financially. Don't get me wrong; not having cash in your pocket to buy a pop to quench your thirst on a hot day is NOT the same as trying to survive below the poverty line. One is a temporary inconvenience; the other is insidious bondage.

Still, there is something to be learned in every experience. My 'cash-poor' episodes have been opportunities for greater awareness and empathy. So, this may be how it feels to want to purchase something and to be unable. Uninvited feelings of inadequacy and exclusion creep into my spirit. From where did they come? Just because I can't buy something doesn't mean I'm 'less of a person,' so why does it feel like that? Watching others indulge and quench their thirst, I stand on the outside, not included in the party of privilege.

The prophet Isaiah imagined a time when everyone - even those without a penny in their pocket - would be able to drink and eat at God's table. No exceptions. No exclusions. Not only will folks satisfy their thirst and hunger, but they will delight. It will be a time of grand celebration.

It is a vision of inclusion, abundance, and community. Isaiah peels back the curtain and says, "look, see, this is what God is all about." God has a dream for a broken and impoverished humanity. It is at once both spiritual and physical (you really can't separate body and spirit.). Anyone who hungers (and who doesn't) is welcome and part of God's intention for cosmic restoration. God yearns for greater connection with a hungry and thirsty and busted creation.

We begin our WELCOME Faith Chats with the distinction between God's hospitality and the kind of worldly hospitality that always seems to come with a price-tag. The world's hospitality is mostly transactional. Even when it seeks to build relationships, it is in the context of future business or self-benefit. We give so that we might get. We host so that others will invite us to their parties. Reciprocity remains a reality that taints motives.

But what if we adopted a different perspective of hospitality? What if we allowed something other than our culture, politics, and economics to inform and direct our welcome?

Instead of transactional (*quid pro quo*), the Bible imagines hospitality in a purely relational way. God loves and wants to be in a life-giving relationship with the human creature. God gives abundantly. Even when humanity ignores and rejects God's good gifts, God continues to provide. Although we can trace this pattern throughout both testaments of scripture, the life of Jesus offers perhaps the clearest example. Jesus empties himself, selflessly, for the sake of others. Around a variety of tables, Jesus brings people together and invites them to the banquet of mutual love.

May we find the wisdom and grace that we need to expand our welcome as we both receive and share in Christ's abundant love.

In Christ's Light,

Pastor Walt

Reading God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:15- 0:20)

Read Isaiah 55:1-3

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

Luke 9:12-19

“When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.”

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

Initial reactions (5 minutes)

What surprises you about this story? What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about abundance and welcome?

Digging Deeper into WELCOME (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion.

Option A: Exploring WELCOME as The Abundance of God:

What connections can you make between the two passages, Isaiah 55:1-3 and Luke 9:12-19? How do these passages relate or interact with one another?

What do we learn about welcome and hospitality from them? Do they open or close our thinking about welcome/hospitality?

When have you experienced the abundance of God as welcome?

Option B: Examining Characters

Look at one or more of these characters in this story:

Discuss:

With which character do you most identify? Why?

Which character is most puzzling to you?

What do you think was going through each at the start of the story?

Where do you think they found themselves needing welcome? Did they experience welcome?

Was there any change during the course of the story? What caused it?

What does this story tell us about the abundance of God?

Finish up the thought:

I feel like _____ most when I _____,

If I encountered _____ on the street, I would _____.

It would be helpful to seek the perspective of _____ when I am faced with _____.

Option C: CRACKING OPEN the MYTHS of WELCOME: There is NOT enough.

Each session, I invite us to tackle a commonly held myth that leads us in directions that are less than helpful. We don't usually give much thought to these things and accept them without question. However, these myths can erect barriers between God and us. They separate us from trusting in the ultimate nature of our relationship with our Creator. Also, they get in the way of our loving our neighbor.

Watch VIDEO SEGMENT: ([click here for link: http://www.lightfromthishill.com/faithteams-video-access-page](http://www.lightfromthishill.com/faithteams-video-access-page))

Discussion:

What do you think? Is there any value to this myth?

In what ways does this myth lead us in directions that are less than helpful?

What kinds of barriers might this myth erect between God and us? Between our neighbors and ourselves?

Based on the life of Jesus or your experience, what alternatives can you suggest?

Option D: Haiku

A Trio of Haikus on WELCOME as God's Abundance

DO I HAVE ENOUGH?
FEAR ASKS A HAUNTING QUESTION.
INSECURITY.

I STRUGGLE TO TRUST
THAT GOD WILL PROVIDE FOR ME
WHAT I NEED TODAY.

FAITH MUSTERS COURAGE
I IMAGINE ABUNDANCE
IN GOD-ALL I NEED.

Discuss the Haikus above. How do you connect or disconnect with them? Try writing Haikus of your own. Remember the form: Three lines with the first and third having five syllables. The second line has seven syllables.

Option E: Connecting to your Group:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for the recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Where do you experience abundance in your life? Where is it most absent?
What issues are you dealing with that could be reframed through the lens of the abundance of God?
What concerns you most in our community as a person of faith? Why? What can be done about it?

CALL to ACTION (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Based on your conversation as a group, consider the following questions:

What action does God's abundance inspire in you?
How might you be able to share your time, talent, and treasure in response?
What might we do as a community of faith together in response?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Sharing of appreciation for learning: *Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Appoint someone to be recorder of the prayer requests. At the start of next week, the recorder can remind the Faith Team of the previous week's prayer concerns. This will allow for updates. Your Faith Team might also want to send a note to those for whom it prays.

Bible Study Session Two: The Love of Stranger

Gathering Together - (10 minutes: 0:00- 0:10)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...

Gracious God, bless our time together with your presence. Help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (5 minutes: 0:10- 0:15)

Somewhere in the Carolinas, we stopped for lunch at a McDonalds. My family was on the way to camp at Huntington Beach State Park. It was in the days when my boys were a quarter of the height of their parents. As our slow-moving crew made its way to the golden arches, a young man approached our party.

His shabby appearance indicated that he was acquainted with hard times. "Can you help me out? I'm hungry and haven't eaten for a while."

Before I was able to filter the response, as I usually do, I heard myself saying, "We'll buy you lunch." He ordered using an extra value meal number but refused to enter the restaurant. Was he banned?

Within ten minutes, I gave him a warm paper sack of fries and a double quarter- pounder. The unnamed man took the bag, muttered a few words of thanks, and found a spot on the grassy knoll that bordered the parking lot to sit down to eat. From a table inside the burger joint, my family watched him devour his lunch. By the time that we finished, he was begging another handout from a different family at the Arby's across the street.

In this Faith Chat, we move from God's abundance to the care of strangers. Although it might seem like a big jump, the Greek word *philoxenia*, which we translate "hospitality," means "love for the stranger,"

From the pages of Genesis, we hear the foundational story of Abraham providing a welcome to three traveling strangers. They turn out to be angels, and they bring miraculous news to the aging nomad and his childless wife that they will have a son. In contrast to the greeting, which the strangers receive at the patriarch's tent, is the sexual violence the three encounter in the nearby village of Sodom. This story is about a lack of hospitality (not a universal ban on homosexuality.) Sodom is destroyed on account of their violent 'unwelcome.'

When I think about my encounters with strangers, like the McDonald's episode I recalled above, my track record is not admirable. Although I've never been violent towards strangers, I haven't emulated Abraham's hospitality. Somewhere in the recesses of my heart, there is deep suspicion.

I was taught to be cautious; otherwise, others might scam me out of my money. Unknown people can't fully be trusted and are likely to harm me. So goes the programming within my soul that runs deep and wide like when the Mississippi approaches New Orleans. Old tapes are hard to erase.

Don't get me wrong -I'm usually polite when I encounter someone I don't know. But, I am always on my guard. Unless, of course, they are coming in the front door of the church on a Sunday morning! I am glad to welcome those folks with a sense of delight. The challenge is to go and do likewise in the middle of the week when I'm driving downtown.

I have said it before - I am a spiritual work in progress. Loving strangers is a growth edge for me. There is some heavy prayerful lifting that I need to do before my Sunday morning welcome becomes a daily welcome. I'm guessing that I'm not alone.

Currently, one of the significant challenges facing the church is the perception that we are not a welcoming place. We like to think that we welcome everyone. The reality, however, is that many unchurched folks feel as though the church is more concerned with judgment than welcome. Centuries of demanding adherence to rigid doctrines and established norms earned this sullied reputation. A transformation is desperately needed. We need to reclaim the passion that the church had in the first century of its life for the stranger.

In this Faith Chat, we will seek to expand our capacity for welcoming the stranger. We will ask, what does it mean to go beyond polite and surface-level interaction with those we don't know? Can we open enough space in our hearts for the kind of love that Jesus expressed with his inclusive table fellowship? Recall, Jesus had a reputation of eating with outcasts and sinners. As followers, what would it take for us to be able to do the same?

As we journey forth, I pray for the courage to take that closer walk with Christ. May we find the wisdom and grace that we need to expand our welcome to include those who are yet to be our friends.

In Christ's Light,

Pastor Walt

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

Read Deuteronomy 10:17-19

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Choose one of the following:

Genesis 18:1-15

“The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At

the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.””

-or-

Luke 17:11-19

“On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

Initial reactions (5 minutes)

Respond to the story that you chose (either Jesus’s healing of the lepers or Abraham’s angelic visit)

What surprises you about this story? What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about abundance and welcome?

Digging Deeper into WELCOME (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion.

Option A: Exploring WELCOME as Love of Stranger:

What connections can you make between the two passages, Deuteronomy 10: 17-19 and the other story you chose? How do these passages relate or interact with one another?

What do we learn about welcome from them? Do they open or close our thinking about welcome?

When have you experienced welcoming a stranger ?

Option B: Examining Characters

Look at one or more of these characters in the story you chose.

Discuss:

With which character do you most identify? Why?

Which character is most puzzling to you?

What do you think was going through each at the start of the story?

Where do you think they found themselves needing welcome? Did they experience a welcome?

Was there any change during the course of the story? What caused it?

What does this story tell us about loving strangers?

Finish up the thought:

I feel like _____ most when I _____,

If I encountered _____ on the street, I would _____.

It would be helpful to seek the perspective of _____ when I am faced with _____.

Option C: CRACKING OPEN the MYTHS of WELCOME: Stranger Danger

Each session, I invite us to tackle a commonly held myth that leads us in directions that are less than helpful. We don't usually give much thought to these things and accept them without question. However, these myths can erect barriers between God and us. They separate us from trusting in the ultimate nature of our relationship with our Creator. Also, they get in the way of loving our neighbor.

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Discussion:

What do you think? Is there any value to this myth?

In what ways does this myth lead us in directions that are less than helpful?

What kinds of barriers might this myth erect between God and us? Between our neighbors and ourselves?

Based on the life of Jesus or your experience, what alternatives can you suggest?

Option D: Haiku

A Trio of Haikus on WELCOME of the Stranger

I DON'T ALWAYS SEE
THE FACE OF HUMANITY
DIFFERENT FROM ME.

WHEN STRANGERS APPROACH
FEAR SWELLS INSIDE MY SOUL
I DREAD; "FRIEND OR FOE?"

WHEN YOU ARE UNKNOWN,
IT IS TOO HARD TO LOVE YOU.
I'LL BEGIN, "HELLO!"

Discuss the Haikus above. How do you connect or disconnect with them? Try writing Haikus of your own. Remember the form: Three lines with the first and third having five syllables. The second line has seven syllables.

Option E: Connecting to your Group:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for the recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

What experiences do you have in welcoming strangers? What did you learn from them?

What issues are involved with welcoming those who don't know? What are some of the perils and possibilities?

What ways can we navigate our fears?

How might our church community become a place where strangers are welcomed? What gets in the way?

What might we do about it?

CALL to ACTION (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Based on your conversation as a group, consider the following questions:

What action does God's welcome inspire in you?

How might you be able to share your time, talent, and treasure in response?

What might we do as a community of faith together in response?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Sharing of appreciation for learning: *Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Appoint someone to be recorder of the prayer requests. At the start of next week, the recorder can remind the Faith Team of the previous week's prayer concerns. This will allow for updates. Your Faith Team might also want to send a note to those for whom it prays.

Bible Study Session Three: The Greatest

Gathering Together - (10 minutes: 0:00- 0:10)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, bless our time together with your presence. Help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (5 minutes: 0:10- 0:15)

Superman or Aquaman? Packers or Vikings? Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley? Mom's Apple Pie or the one you can buy at Beverly's? Who's the greatest?

Take any two items, ask the question, and prepare for a debate. It is human nature to compare and contrast - sometimes with great passion. It is also buried somewhere deep in our genetic makeup to want to win this verbal joust. Who wants to lose?

Maybe it is just me. I've been known to be a little competitive. I don't like to come in last place. Be it a competition, an argument (either playful or serious), or my location in a supermarket line, I prefer to come out near the top. Although I have learned to deal with losing, it is always a bit of a disappointment. I vow to do better next time.

The disciples of Jesus seemed to have similar wiring. They wanted the best seat, the place of highest honor, right next to Jesus. Who wouldn't want the prized title of 'best friend' to Jesus?

Their struggle over who was the greatest also had a cultural dimension. In the Greco-Roman world in which the disciples lived, your social ranking determined your place at the banquet table. The coveted spot next to the host went to the most privileged person in the room. All eyes, admiration, and envy were upon the one in the hot seat.

It was bound to happen, and the disciples couldn't help themselves. They had to secure the highest honor. To sit at the right hand of Jesus came with power and privilege in the kingdom of God. At least

that is what they surmised. Based on all that they observed from the world around them, they drew a logical conclusion.

Except, they were wrong!

The kingdom of God that Jesus taught and preached operated on a different set of principles. Greatness was not an accomplishment that came with privilege and power. It didn't come with reservations for the best seats in the house. Jesus turned the whole system upside down. He elevated the ones on the bottom, the least, to places of prominence. Service to them was the path to recognition within the kingdom of God. If you wanted to 'get ahead' then you needed to get down on your knees and wash feet.

Adopting this gospel reversal is key to reclaiming hospitality as a core Christian value and practice. Recall, at the start of this devotional, I mentioned how our culture had transformed hospitality into a billion-dollar a year industry reserved for those who can afford it. Such welcome is highly transactional. You get what you pay for and the more you pay, the more you get. There are clear winners and losers.

Social standing, privilege, and wealth might tempt us - as it did the disciples - to focus our energy and efforts into attracting the culturally-desirable into our churches. How do we market for success? Surely, in a time when church attendance has slipped, we must take action to ensure survival. If we can engage the "right people," then we won't have to worry about paying bills.

Pursuing this way of thinking about welcome is a distraction to gospel-centered ministry. It departs from Jesus's teaching about the way that hospitality is to be lived out in the kingdom of God. Welcome, according to God's intentions, is relational. It is about connecting with the lives of people and not their purses. As such, it must start with those who can't pay any bill, can't reciprocate the honor of the best seat at the table.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus extends welcome to the poor, outcasts, and socially 'undesirable.' The unlikely audience of Jesus's compassion demonstrates that God's welcome is about building relationships outside the culturally privileged ones.

In this Faith Chat, we will take up the whole issue of greatness as it relates to Christian welcome. We will explore humility as an essential value to redefining greatness.

]In Christ's Light,

Pastor Walt

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15- 0:20)

Read Mark 10:13-16

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

Matthew 20:20-28

“Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” But Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Responding to God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

Initial reactions (5 minutes)

What surprises you about this story? What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about abundance and welcome?

Digging Deeper into WELCOME (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion.

Option A: Exploring WELCOME as “the Greatest”:

What connections can you make between the two passages, Mark 10:13-16 and Matthew 20:20-28? How do these passages relate or interact with one another?

What do we learn about welcome from them? Do they open or close our thinking about welcome?

When have you experienced the need to be “Greatest”?

Option B: Examining Characters

Look at one or more of these characters in this story:

Discuss:

With which character do you most identify? Why?

Which character is most puzzling to you?

What do you think was going through each at the start of the story?

Where do you think they found themselves needing welcome? Did they experience welcome?

Was there any change during the course of the story? What caused it?

What does this story tell us about the abundance of God?

Finish up the thought:

I feel like _____ most when I _____,

If I encountered _____ on the street, I would _____.

It would be helpful to seek the perspective of _____ when I am faced with _____.

Option C: CRACKING OPEN the MYTHS of WELCOME: My Needs are Greatest

Each session, I invite us to tackle a commonly held myth that leads us in directions that are less than helpful. We don't usually give much thought to these things and accept them without question. However, these myths can erect barriers between God and us. They separate us from trusting in the ultimate nature of our relationship with our Creator. Also, they get in the way of loving our neighbor.

Watch VIDEO SEGMENT (available after 1/12/2021) : [\(click here for link:](#)

<http://www.lightfromthishill.com/faithteams-video-access-page>)

Discussion:

What do you think? Is there any value to this myth?

In what ways does this myth lead us in directions that are less than helpful?

What kinds of barriers might this myth erect between God and us? Between our neighbors and ourselves?

Based on the life of Jesus or your experience, what alternatives can you suggest?

Option D: Haiku

A Trio of Haikus on Greatness and Service

JESUS TAUGHT HIS FRIENDS
TRUTH THAT'S HARD TO UNDERSTAND;
THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST.

TO BE TRULY GREAT,
TAKES MORE THAN POWER OR SKILL.
IT REQUIRES SERVICE.

OPENING THE DOOR,
LOVE SEEKS OPPORTUNITY
TO RESPOND TO NEED.

Discuss the Haikus above. How do you connect or disconnect with them? Try writing Haikus of your own. Remember the form: Three lines with the first and third having five syllables. The second line has seven syllables.

Option E: Connecting to your Group:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for the recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Who are the people that you admire as being great? What makes them great?

How do they compare with Jesus's definitions of greatness? Do they serve others? Are they compassionate? Do they show empathy? How kind are they?

Which qualities of greatness do you have? How might you grow and develop these qualities in yourself today? What challenges make it hard for you to serve others? What would it take to overcome them?

CALL to ACTION (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Based on your conversation as a group, consider the following questions:

What action does God's invitation to serve others inspire in you?

How might you be able to share your time, talent, and treasure in response?

What might we do as a community of faith together in response?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Sharing of appreciation for learning: *Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Appoint someone to be recorder of the prayer requests. At the start of next week, the recorder can remind the Faith Team of the previous week's prayer concerns. This will allow for updates. Your Faith Team might also want to send a note to those for whom it prays.

Bible Study Session Four: Meeting Jesus “Out There”

Gathering Together - (10 minutes: 0:00- 0:10)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, bless our time together with your presence. Help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (5 minutes: 0:10- 0:15)

Centuries ago, passionate missionaries left their European homelands to spread the gospel to Africa and the Americas. As colonization expanded, so did Christianity. It is a legacy that many in today's church, myself included, view as problematic. The practices of evangelization, as "well-meaning" as they might have been, caused subjugation and hardship for indigenous peoples worldwide.

Acknowledging the negative issues associated with missionary expansion, I can't help but think (perhaps it comes from my place of privilege) that not all the missionaries were all imperialist conquerors. No doubt, many were motivated by spiritual reasons as they left their homelands to live and die in foreign lands.

These missionaries made dramatic sacrifices to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ "over there." They traveled oceans, learned languages that were strange to their ears, and interacted with folks a world away. Hundreds of years later, the churches that the missionaries planted continue to proclaim Christ.

Closer to home, at the end of worship, Christians are sent into the world. The liturgy charges us to bring the love of Christ to others. From an early age, I learned that Communion feeds us so that we might feed others. Through this holy sacrament, Jesus fills us and strengthens us to be Christ's hands, feet, and heart in the world.

But, what if we don't just bring the loving presence of Jesus into the world? What if when we leave our sanctuaries on Sunday morning, we head out to meet Jesus who is already "out there?" What if

worship isn't so much about filling us up with Christ as it is about sharpening our vision as to where we should look to see Jesus?

My doctoral studies mentor, The Rev. Dr. Paul Galbreath, was the one who first cracked open my imagination on the matter of seeking Jesus "out there." In his book Leading From the Table, he suggests that Communion is about shaping us to be able to recognize Jesus's presence in the world. Worship should direct our attention to places of struggle and need as being the location of the Christ who identifies with the poor and hurting.

Matthew, chapter 25, serves as a grounding place for this idea. When Jesus separates the sheep (his flock) from the goats (not his flock), he does so based on whether they have served his needs. Did they give him food, shelter, clothes when he was in want? Both the sheep and the goats are confused - when was it when we saw you in need? Jesus answers them; whenever you saw the least of these in need, you saw me. I was there, right in front of your eyes, in the guise of the world's hurting and begging people. The passage is a powerful motivator when it comes to social action. It also, as Paul Galbreath suggests, locates Christ in the profaned places of the world beyond sacred sanctuaries. Christ lives out there, just as much as Jesus lives in the context of worship inside our churches.

In this Faith Chat, we will explore the idea of Jesus being "out there," as it relates to welcome and sharing in God's greeting. Instead of sharing Jesus with others, what if we thought about meeting Jesus? What if Christian welcome was not so much about giving Christ to those who don't have him? What if Christian welcome sought to receive the Christ we find in the stranger?

It might seem to be a nuance shift. Does it matter if we view ourselves as bringing Jesus to others or meeting Jesus in others? Isn't it the welcome that is most important?

The importance of this distinction lies in power and privilege. If we continue to think that we are the only ones who have Jesus, then we will continue to make the mistakes of colonization. From the lofty place of "the possessor of Christ," we will continue to impose our culture and worldview upon others. We will be unable to have meaningful engagement that is mutual.

We will judge others as unworthy heathens as did our ancestors. A spiritual arrogance will taint our best intentions. Instead of building bridges and relationships with others (particularly others from other spiritual practices and traditions), we will contribute negatively to the gap. Only when we approach others with a deep sense of humility and reverence - after all, we are entering the presence of Christ in them, will we be in a place where we can welcome.

In Christ's Light, Pastor Walt

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15- 0:20)

Read John 21: 4-6

“Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.”

Matthew 25: 31-40

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for 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.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Responding to God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

Initial reactions (5 minutes)

What surprises you about this story? What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about abundance and welcome?

Digging Deeper into WELCOME (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion.

Option A: Exploring WELCOME as Meeting Jesus “Out There”:

What connections can you make between the two passages, John 21:4-6 and Matthew 25:31-40? How do these passages relate or interact with one another?

What do we learn about welcome from them? Do they open or close our thinking about welcome?

When have you experienced the presence of Jesus “out there”?

Option B: Examining Characters

Look at one or more of these characters in this story:

Discuss:

With which character do you most identify? Why?

Which character is most puzzling to you?

What do you think was going through each at the start of the story?

Where do you think they found themselves needing welcome? Did they experience welcome?

Was there any change during the course of the story? What caused it?

What does this story tell us about the abundance of God?

Finish up the thought:

I feel like _____ most when I _____,

If I encountered _____ on the street, I would _____.

It would be helpful to seek the perspective of _____ when I am faced with _____.

Option C: CRACKING OPEN the MYTHS of WELCOME: We are the Only Ones to Bring Jesus “Out There”

Each session, I invite us to tackle a commonly held myth that leads us in directions that are less than helpful. We don't usually give much thought to these things and accept them without question. However, these myths can erect barriers between God and us. They separate us from trusting in the ultimate nature of our relationship with our Creator. Also, they get in the way of loving our neighbor.

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Discussion:

What do you think? Is there any value to this myth?

In what ways does this myth lead us in directions that are less than helpful?

What kinds of barriers might this myth erect between God and us? Between our neighbors and ourselves?

Based on the life of Jesus or your experience, what alternatives can you suggest?

Option D: Haiku

A Trio of Haikus on Welcoming God, "Out There"

WHERE DO I FIND GOD?
CONFINED IN "SACRED" PLACES?
JESUS WAITS OUT THERE...

BEYOND THE CHURCH DOOR,
JESUS LIVES OUTSIDE THE CHURCH,
IN THOSE WHO NEED LOVE.

IN A WORLD OF HURT,
STRUGGLE, VIOLENCE, OPPRESSION...
CHRIST REMAINS ALIVE.

Discuss the Haikus above. How do you connect or disconnect with them? Try writing Haikus of your own. Remember the form: Three lines with the first and third having five syllables. The second line has seven syllables.

Option E: Connecting to your Group:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for the recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

What is the most sacred place you have ever been? What made it special and holy for you? Recall how it felt when you were last there. How did you experience God's presence while you were there?

What is the place where you least expect to see God? Why? What about that place is "ungodly" to you? Imagine walking in that profane place and finding Jesus. What would Jesus say to you as you find him there?

CALL to ACTION (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Based on your conversation as a group, consider the following questions:

What action does the idea that Jesus is "out there" inspire in you?

How might you be able to share your time, talent, and treasure in response?

What might we do as a community of faith together in response?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Sharing of appreciation for learning: Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Appoint someone to be recorder of the prayer requests. At the start of next week, the recorder can remind the Faith Team of the previous week's prayer concerns. This will allow for updates. Your Faith Team might also want to send a note to those for whom it prays.