

**“Marks of Hospitality”**  
**Mark 9:30-37**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**September 20, 2009**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

It’s hard not to feel smug around here about welcoming children. I think we’re doing pretty well. I daresay Jesus would be downright proud of us. On a scale from 1 to 10 we’re up in the 7s or 8s. We’re probably among the best of the best. Maybe we’re one of the greatest churches in the city when it comes to welcoming children. I was feeling pretty good about where this sermon was headed until I realized that Jesus is criticizing disciples for arguing over who is the greatest.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then he took a little child and put it among them.” Now children in Jesus’ day didn’t conjure up for people some of our images of innocence or modesty or simplicity. There were no children’s museums in Jesus day. No playgrounds. No special laws protecting them. They were seen as powerless, as invisible, as the least important members of society. These are the ones you should welcome, Jesus says.

His words cause me to look around again at our community and ask the question, how well do we do in welcoming everybody even and especially those labeled as powerless, labeled as invisible, labeled the least important members of society? How well do we do in welcoming strangers who come into our lives looking for relationship or for a connection with our God?

The membership committee has been asking that question as it relates to visitors who come on Sunday mornings. How well do we do in welcoming strangers who come looking for a community or for a connection with our God? We’ve changed some things. We’ve added ushers – something we haven’t had for a long time. We’ve made sure that our only fully accessible entrance has a person nearby to make it truly accessible. We’ve added more hearing assist devices to make the service hearable to those who need assistance. Coming soon is a brochure in every pew to share basic information with visitors. We’ll be doing away with the friendship pads in favor of a comment card. Yet none of these changes affect the most important mark of hospitality that a community can offer – the welcome that is offered by its people.

Many of you already have a heart for hospitality. You are motivated to extend yourself toward the life of a newcomer. To share the welcome you have already received. The only real reluctance I hear among us from time to time is specific and twofold. One concern is expressed this way: “I’m worried about introducing myself to someone I don’t know because I am afraid I’m going to offend someone by greeting a member who has been here for a long time.” My response to that is how wonderful! How wonderful to be in a community so enthusiastic about welcoming new people that even people who have been here for generations get a warm welcome. I hope we can agree right now that this is a risk that we are willing to take.

The other concern is how to greet people who are asking for help. There is no perfect answer to that question. But basic hospitality is a good place to start. What we have to offer here is prayer, a listening ear, a bit of food, and something to drink. The ushers have specific information on services provided in our community but our best response is always relational. Whoever wants to be first of all must be last of all and servant of all.

Henri Nouwen once wrote that we live in “a world of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture, and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self and from God.” Nouwen argued that “if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.” “Hospitality is not to change people,” he wrote, “but to offer them space where change can take place.”<sup>1</sup>

Too often the church has been confused about that role. We have thought, perhaps mistakenly, that our primary role is to teach the truth about God, or to *conjure up* God like a genie from a bottle, or to inform people about the way they should think about God, or pray about God, or act to please God. It may be that our call today is closer to what Nouwen proposed – to offer space where change can take place. When we offer that space to strangers, God is likely to come and pay us all a visit. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” Jesus taught his disciples, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Offering that kind of space is not always comfortable or easy in a world built on divisions. Fearing those we do not yet know, or those we see as different, sometimes seems easier than making room for the untamed presence of God.

It wasn't an easy process for the church where Kate grew up, where I was welcomed. Founded in the 1960s on a vision of racial equality, it struggled in the 80s as divisions over sexual orientation threatened to tear at the fabric of faith. Meetings were held. Conversations had together. Some hurtful, others healing. At that time, the church was not of one mind on who it ought to be or what it ought to do.

The immediate question before it was whether it should vote to become a More Light congregation – to say publicly and officially that gay and lesbian people were welcome in the church. A congregational discussion was held. Some argued that the church should be welcoming of all people but didn't need to be so public about it. Others argued that becoming More Light might undermine its original and deep commitment to racial inclusion, supplanting one vision with another. Good people struggled with other good people. Some left. Others came.

But if there was a moment that tipped the scales, it was when an African-American woman stood and shared with the church her memories of growing up.

She said, “People we used to call ‘hobos’ would walk past the houses in our town. Often they were thirsty or hungry. Sometimes they were tired and needed a place to rest. And my mother had put a mark out on the little fence post at the front of the house. When the hobos

---

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 46 quote in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006, 79.

traveling through saw the mark they knew this is a safe place where I can get something to eat, this is a safe place where I can get something to drink, this is a safe place where I won't be turned away. What we are doing today, she said, is putting a mark out on our post so that everybody who passes by this church will continue to know that when we say welcome, we mean you.

This church has put that same mark out on the post more than once. Each time, the church has struggled, but come to the same conclusion – when we say welcome, we mean you. That doesn't mean that everyone who comes here will find what they are looking for. It doesn't mean that we always agree on what you ought to think about God, or say about God, or believe about God. It doesn't mean that this community will never disappoint, or even injure. It means simply that we've managed to carve out a little space – space for you and for me, and for another and another and another.

Every so often in that space, God has shown up - in the wonderings of a child's wisdom, in a hug that softens the space that hardens over time between people, in dreams shared through whispers or through protests, in bread that is broken and then shared together – God has shown up. Maybe when we put that mark out on our post, it really means that God has already put a mark on each of us.

We put a similar mark this morning, not on a post, but on the newest member of our congregation. I like to imagine that as we mark Eloise with the sign of the cross that these two kinds of marks are not all that different. We are saying to Eloise when God extends a welcome, God means you. And when we are marked in the name of the one who welcomed all people, even and especially those labeled powerless, labeled invisible, labeled the least important members of society, we pray for the same power to welcome the people Christ welcomed; to serve the people Christ served.

The church, after all, is not a place. It's not an institution. It's not a method, or a system, or a philosophy. It is just people – a servant people trying to make some space, space for strangers to come and share a bite to eat, a cool drink to quench our thirst, a safe place where God won't be turned away.