

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Over the last two weeks in our appointed Gospel lessons from the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we have heard about the cost of discipleship. This chapter in Matthew is known as the Mission Discourse of Jesus. Today we have the closing verses of that discourse. In this discourse Jesus *calls* his twelve apostles, gives them power, and sends them to heal the sick and drive out evil spirits. He sends them on a mission to preach the Good News of God's promise of mercy and salvation, warning them that they will face danger, but promising that God will care for them. As Jesus sends them, and says to them,

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” (Matt 10:40)

Within the first two verses of today's Gospel lesson the word “welcome” appears six times. Because of its repetitive use, it becomes an important word in this lesson that is before us. However, the translated word “welcome” or δέχομαι (*déchomai*) in the Greek, which means to receive someone or accept them instead of welcome. Listen again to the verse in this translation:

Whoever receives or accepts you receives or accepts me, and whoever receives or accepts me, receives or accepts the one who sent me.

This is one of those times that the translation of welcome works better than receive or accept...it seems to soften the divisiveness that can be heard when looking at what Jesus is saying to the apostles today in this Gospel lesson. Nonetheless, there remains a divisive undercurrent in this passage in that one side receives or accepts the other...or that one side welcomes the other.

Today there are so many different interpretations of Jesus' words and every interpretation is correct...just ask the translators. Likewise, there are many different interpretations of how we as a church collectively read, understand, and worship the Word of God. The Catholics would say the Lutherans have it all wrong when it comes to our Holy Eucharist. And of course, the Lutherans say the Catholics have it all wrong. And together we both say, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” So, who welcomes whom...God, of course...but this is how this line ends up being so divisive. But this line about welcome or accepting and receiving is speaking more to the nature of the apostolic office and not so much as how a layperson receives, accepts, or welcomes the Word of God. One would think that the churches would have a better understanding of this.

Nonetheless, with the sending of the apostles with these words that are in the Gospel before us today, Jesus is setting up the apostolic foundation of the church which refers to the apostles' unique role to be the immediate messengers of Jesus and to carry out his authority and preach the gospel faithfully. Jesus Christ Himself is also an apostle as we hear in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. (Hebrews 5:1)

In this Epistle we hear the Apostolic Succession from God to Jesus to the Apostles, and then to the one's the Apostles called and ordained. While Jesus was here on earth, He personally selected from His many followers twelve men and gave them an apostleship—special

responsibility to receive and spread His message after He returned to heaven. During his time with the apostles, Jesus trained them, He did not explain the criteria that He used to choose them, he simply called them, trained them, and sent them. In other words what Jesus is addressing in this line about receiving, accepting, and welcoming is the office of ordained ministry. The office is called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments according to the Gospel...and Jesus teaches them that, the one who welcomes...welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. So, what are we to take away from this lesson then if this is directed at the apostolic office and apostolic succession?

Even if we are not ordained, we are all Baptized into the priesthood of all believers which calls us all to that same standard...share the Good News of Jesus Christ. This past week, as you all just saw, these kids were here learning about the light of Jesus Christ. I attempted to explain to them that the light of Christ is within them and that light is faith, it is love, and it is the ability to accept and welcome. I read for them this passage from Matthew's Gospel that was read to them and us in the Rite of Baptism:

¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:16)

I asked the kids how do we shine that light for others to see? And little Paige answered, "When we are nice to others." What little Paige unknowingly told us that evening was that it's not about receiving and accepting, nor is it even about welcoming, it is simply about being gracious and respectful of others by simply being nice to them. This comment from this dear child is a message that we can all apply in this line from the Gospel lesson that seems to amplify the divisive tension within our culture today. Whoever receives or accepts you receives or accepts me seems to feed into the cultural temperament of hooray for me and to hell with you if you do not accept me.

As we think about this divisiveness, let us earnestly consider this: that both sides are passionately standing up for what is in their hearts and what they perceive to be the truth. Both sides are proclaiming the truth as they see it and both sides are equally as passionate about what they believe that truth to be.

Who is right, which side is correct? Do we accept them or do they accept us? It doesn't really matter because God receives, accepts, and welcomes us all through Jesus Christ and this is what we share with all we encounter.

As we consider this receiving, accepting, and welcoming, consider this also...the Bible doesn't just tell us what *we* ought to do, it tells us what God has already done, is doing, and what God will do for us...it also tells us what God will do for the other side that disagrees with us. The Bible...the entire Bible and not just our favorite or familiar passages tells us of the revelation of God in our world through Jesus Christ.¹ The Bible tells us of a God who loves our enemies, those who stand in disagreement with us as much as God loves each of us.

¹ Rev. Gregory Fryer, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church New York, New York. In his sermon for June 28, 2020, 4 Pentecost (8-13) Year A entitled, "Conflict Between Two Good People."

Today, as in every time we gather around God's Word, we hear of grace and mercy, we hear of forgiveness and life through a faith that allows us all to see that truth in God's promise, Jesus Christ. It has been my call to proclaim that promise to all...to proclaim to all who want to listen and welcome, accept, and receive that Good News. Through our faith then, we are called as Christians to discern and trust...openly and honestly...that truth revealed among us in Jesus Christ no matter who it favors.

Last week, we heard words from Jesus about division that caused us to stop and perhaps say to ourselves, "what?!...no, Jesus doesn't really mean that." After all, it was Father's Day, so why would Jesus tell us that he has come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother and so on. The words of Jesus last week may have caused us to stumble in our faith and disregard the words all together or at least really consider and discern the intent of those words concerning God and our faith in God. But there was one thing I think we were convinced of, they were words one would not expect to hear from Jesus because we really DIDN'T care much for those words and what Jesus was saying to us. However, they were coming from Jesus nonetheless, and while we may not have liked them or fully understood them, their intent was the revelation of God, in that, receiving, accepting, and welcoming was going to cause some discomfort and disagreement, cause us to step out of our comfort zone and realize that we ourselves are not always going to be received, accepted, and welcomed, even by our own families were there may be conflict and arguments because they want to walk away and not receive, accept, or welcome the words of grace that are given to all.

Nonetheless, we can point the finger at the media platforms, the politicians and their divisive rhetoric or the cheap, hurtful, and damaging prophecy of the many and various church "leaders" and "preachers," but sadly and even dangerously, the real damage is done when we listen and feed into the divisive rhetoric and cheap grace due to our ego and ignorance.

I can stand here and say, this church...St. Paul Lutheran Church is a much better church...sooo much better...and those other places are so wrong with their style of worship...I can say that because I have said it, however, cheap shots and cheap consolation have nothing to do with genuine prophecy nor is it the Good News of Jesus Christ.² Our faith demands discernment and work and that discernment and work is not achieved by taking sides and pointing out the sins and the faults of others. True prophecy or proclamation is not a comparison. Faith is not heightened or improved by putting others down. Our faith demands that we look at ourselves and discern where our needed grace for our sins comes from. Our faith is developed and strengthened when it is challenged and used in the world by lifting others up with the grace, we ourselves have received and share. St Paul writes this to the Romans:

¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Romans 6:16)

² Lott, David B. Editor, Nancy Claire Pittman, Richard I. Pervo, S.D. Giere, and Shauna K. Hannan contributing commentators. *New Proclamation Year A 2011. Easter through Christ the King, April 24, 2011 – November 24, 2011.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. This line is undergirded by the commentary on the appointed Old Testament lesson assigned for Sunday June 26, 2011, the Second Sunday after Pentecost, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 8. Page 72.

Do you not know that we present the light of the grace that is Jesus Christ when we are simply nice to others. And with that in mind, we are all sent in the power of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. This power that is assigned to us all through our faith is determined and limited by the Gospel. It is the power of grace, mercy, and love that heals and lifts NOT just us over them, but lifts us all from sin and death through Jesus Christ. The Word incarnate, Jesus Christ has gathered us, this word Jesus Christ has received us, accepted us, and welcomed us this day. And despite our brokenness, Jesus Christ is the true Word that is simply God being nice to us by shining His light of blessing upon us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.