

July 2, 2023
The 5th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 13, Year A
Matthew 10:40-42
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

We Welcome You

“Worshiping God with joy, loving one another, serving all.” That was the easy part.

A few years ago, back in the fall of 2019, which feels a lot longer ago than it actually is, the Forward Leadership Team was stuck.

As part of the Forward Leadership process we had learned that it was important for our congregation to have some kind of easily remembered statement, that summed up who we are as a congregation; so that we could easily and memorably tell our community who we are and so that we could make sure that our actions and activities were true to our identity, focused on who and what we had said that we are.

During the season of Lent in 2019 we had many, many what we called “Why Emmanuel” sessions, during which we asked people to tell their Emmanuel stories, to share why they are a part of this congregation why they consider Emmanuel to be their church. We were very impressed by the level of participation that we received from the congregation and we discovered categories or themes that many people had in common when telling their Emmanuel stories. Those themes were:

- “family” both feeling connected to Emmanuel, like a family, and/or having deep family roots at Emmanuel,
- the centrality of worship as a part of our community life
- the importance of service and giving

On June 23, 2019 we had an event called the “Why Emmanuel Celebration” during which we shared those common themes with people in the congregation and invited people to “drill down” a bit more about what specifically was meaningful to them in each of those categories. We shared in general about what had been expressed by people in each of those categories, had people share stories of Emmanuel that fell into each of the categories, and had words up on the walls of the church under each of the categories.

For example, under worship we had the words:

- Accommodating
- Word of life—gives life
- Women in leadership
- Connecting
- Truth telling
- Pattern/cycle
- Uplifting
- Joyful
- Varied music
- Engaging
- Telling stories
- Unifying
- Children/intergenerational
- Centering, recharging, refreshing

Everyone who attended the Why Emmanuel celebration received three sticker dots and they were invited to add a dot to the word in each category that spoke the most to their Emmanuel experience.

When that process was completed, the Forward Leadership Team looked at the results. And the results felt decisive. We had come up with categories and the words that described the categories after having more than 50 conversations with

people about their Emmanuel experiences and after our Why Emmanuel celebration we had narrowed those stories down to just a few words, words that could easily fit into a tag line or easily memorable identity statement.

So “Worshiping God with joy, loving one another, serving all” was born, and it was good. It felt true to who we are, but there was something important missing, one thing that people had consistently said about Emmanuel that those nine words didn’t capture.

That one thing was the emphasis that people shared about Emmanuel being a church that welcomes. A congregation that had welcomed them and a congregation that welcomes others.

But we couldn’t quite figure out how to say that. Everything else was verbs, action driven, “worshipping, loving, serving.” Should we just say, “Welcoming?” we felt like we had to say something else too. “Worshiping God with joy, loving one another, serving all, Welcoming...” just sounds weird, like there’s something missing. Did we need to say who we were welcoming? We didn’t want to specify who we would welcome, because even in the act of trying to be inclusive, “Welcoming everyone, welcoming all” we might inadvertently exclude someone.

How could we finish our tag line, our identity statement, and include this vital welcoming piece. Finally, someone on the Forward Leadership Team, said, hesitantly, “What about, ‘We welcome you?’”

And there it was. The perfect way to finish this statement that we had agonized over for so long. We welcome you. Whoever you are, whatever your story is, wherever you come from, we welcome you. It’s an honest, though aspirational statement, because such an open unqualified statement of welcome can be hard to live up to, and yet, it felt right, it felt honest, it felt true to who we try to be and who we are called to be.

And I thought of it when I read our gospel reading for today, and saw the words, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40).

Of course, I kind of am reading that backwards. Because the words in today’s gospel reading are not about the disciples learning to welcome others into their fellowship, but about how they are to relate to the people they go to. The chapter of the gospel of Matthew that our gospel reading comes from is chapter 10, where Jesus’ disciples receive their mission. They are told where to go and what to do.

They are sent into the world, to share the good news. “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” They are sent to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. They are sent to bring peace to the households that accept them. They are sent like sheep into the midst of wolves.

They are warned that they will experience persecutions for the message that they bring. They are warned that Jesus’ words might divide them from their families and their communities. They are told to take up their crosses and to follow Jesus. They are told that those who lose their lives for Jesus’ sake will find their lives, will find life in him.

And then we hear, the words of today’s gospel reading, that those who welcome these disciples welcome Jesus and the one who sent them, and those who welcome a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and those who welcome a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, and whoever gives a cup of water in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward.

This ministry of welcoming, it supposed to be a two-way street. The disciples are told that they will face rejection by many, but are also told to expect welcome by some as Jesus’ words, as Jesus’ good news, as Jesus’ life creates new communities, new fellowship, new stories, and even new families.

So, we, who are also Jesus' disciples, are called to welcome, the stranger, who might come in Jesus' name or who might come with questions, the strangers who might come thirsty or who might come full, the stranger who might come scarred from the world's battles or who might come proclaiming good news and with stories of the glimpses of the kingdom of heaven come near, the stranger who might come seeming very different from us or who might come like a long-lost sibling.

We are called to welcome whoever Jesus sends, with open minds and open ears, listening in the words that they speak for the words of a prophet, looking for Jesus in them, and giving a cup of cool water to those who are thirsting, literally or spiritually.

And we are called to remember and give thanks for the welcome that we ourselves have received; for those who have seen Jesus in us, for those who have listened to our stories and heard in them the stories of God, for those who have quenched our physical hunger and thirst with coffee and juice and water and brunches and baked goods and pancakes, and for those who have quenched our spiritual hunger and thirst at a table where are all welcome, with worship that is joyful and honest, with community that is loving, and in service that is meaningful.

We welcome you. That is what we say of ourselves. That is what we commit ourselves to. And we're all included, in the work and challenge of welcoming and in the joy and gift of being welcomed. And when we welcome each other and the stranger who comes to our door, we welcome Jesus and we welcome the one who sent him. We welcome the presence of the Holy Trinity, who comes to us Father, Son, and Spirit, and who as eternal community, lives in our community and rejoices when we welcome each other. Amen.