

Pentecost IV  
2 Kings 4:8-30 and Matthew 10:40-42  
June 28, 2020  
Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough

The movie *Grand Canyon*, released in 1991, featured a disparate group of people living in Los Angeles, whose lives are revealed to be inter-connected through a series of unexpected events. Mack, played by Kevin Kline, encounters Simon, played by Danny Glover, when he is in need, and then finds himself drawn into a friendship. Mack's wife, Claire, goes running one day and hears a baby crying, abandoned in the bushes. She takes the baby home and marvels at the soft skin, dimpled cheeks, the beauty of a little life.

I saw the movie in college, and have watched it several times, namely for a conversation that Mack and Claire have toward the end of the film. Mack is downplaying the significance of his newfound friendship with Simon. He is likewise resisting Claire's desire to adopt this found child. She challenges him to see the people who cross his path as bearers of life-giving, life-changing love. "What if I hadn't heard her? I would have read about this baby in the newspaper, she says to her husband. "O Mack, they found a dead baby in the woods. I must have run right past her." She continues, "You feel something about Simon. A connection has been made. How do you know that this man isn't going to be your friend until the day that you die?"

My original intention for today's sermon was to preach on Genesis 22, Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. It was today's Hebrew lesson from the lectionary. We have followed the saga of Abraham and Sarah throughout June. God's test of Abraham's faithfulness remains a central text in the story of our forebearers in faith. Having never preached on it, I envisioned exploring its out-sized role in our collective religious imagination. Eventually I decided against it, because the story is so traumatic. Amid the many traumas of this season, with sons and daughters being taken from us right now, such a sermon felt too large for a video-taped message. It is a text that needs us to be face-to-face.

At the same time, the impulse toward that tougher scripture symbolized a longing to authentically confront God, who is both inscrutable and generous in provisions, as we come to the halfway point in this up-ending, gut-wrenching year. A recent preaching article named that listeners are not looking for sermons that give them answers -or tell them what to think about any particular headline – but are seeking spaces to name the complex, disturbing, moral dilemmas of our times. Whatever scripture we gather around, God's word can and does speak into a national call for racial justice, the uptick in COVID-19 infections, and the reverberating loss of life and daily routines. God's word can and does speak into worries about how our civic life is eroding, how there can exist radically divergent views in the country about our nation's wellbeing, and how we hold all of this with particular weightiness amid an election year. As people of faith grounded in a good, trustworthy God, we do not need to cower from speaking what we witness in front of us, what we feel in our hearts, what we would name as the crises of our day. Instead we bring it all into a sacred conversation.

Today we have read a story about the prophet Elisha, who follows the more familiar Elijah, as a prophet to Israel during that nation's tumultuous season of a divided people, a less than stellar king and an ominous future. Interestingly this story of Elisha is not about kingly court dealings or international intrigue but of an ordinary, everyday encounter with a friendly household by which he regularly passes. Paired with the prophet Elisha come Jesus's concluding remarks to his disciples after instructing them about the high costs of following him. Here at the conclusion of his words, Jesus changes tone to remind those soon-to-be-itinerant bearers of God's good news that welcome has its reward.

Interestingly, neither text tells us what to think. Instead both focus on how to act. What do we do in a moment of risk, uncertainty, alienation or fear? We lean into welcoming ...welcoming prophets, strangers, and callers for justice. We strike the chord of hospitality, for in it will come life. Jesus links welcome to reward. Those who welcome will be rewarded. I want to shift the word reward to life. Those who are welcomers create and receive life, because life - real, good, joyous, free life - is God's deepest reward. It is God's best gift.

The word welcome means "come and be well" or "be well in your coming." Be well. To welcome is not to say hello or reflexively ask 'How are you doing?' To welcome is to attend to the health, livelihood, heart, soul and future of another. Often our images of hospitality revolve around opening our houses to friends, or those we want to have as friends. Such notions have little to do with strangers who make us uneasy or prophets speaking uncomfortable truths, or disheveled persons who need a good meal. We might very well offer charity to such persons. We might tolerate their disquieting speech. But do we welcome them, as if we were welcoming Christ himself?

Come and be well . . . come and be fed, clothed, restored to health, let your stories be listened to and let them change me. The Christian practice of hospitality is to welcome those in need because the need itself is the basis for the welcome. Lance Pape says, "Christian hospitality is welcoming the needy for the sake of their need."<sup>1</sup> I believe the loss of such hospitality is part of what feels so alarming about our present-day life; whether it is the pursuit of wealth over the welfare of others or the mindset that power or privilege is a sum zero game where someone must lose. Welcome another. See this one not as burden but a blessing; whether that person be a child at the border, a nursing home resident kicked out on the streets, a protestor who says no justice, no peace. I also believe the hope contained in the past few weeks has arisen from the ways the church – and other communities – are reclaiming such hospitality as central to its calling.

What Jesus points to in his welcoming words, Elisha and the Shunammite woman enact. Here is a woman who notices a strange traveler, invites him in for a meal, is blessed by the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Pape, Lance, "Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 10:40-42" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Vol 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011), 193.

this man of God and so rearranges her household to provide him a bedroom. What is her reward? The attentive care of another. Elisha asks, What do you need? When she replies, I'm good. No urgent needs. Elisha's servant notices that her household is empty and her husband is getting old. The longing for a child is there, hidden, until revealed by a strangers' careful attention. After the child is given, after the boy grows, he dies suddenly one afternoon. The woman knows enough to summon the prophet to revive her child. Did you notice how he performs this miracle? By laying his body - forehead to forehead, hand to hand, eyes to eyes, mouth to mouth - on top of the dead boy, inviting the son to welcome Elisha's breath into body. In this moment, hospitality leads to life raised from the dead. And this life-from-death moment started with a woman looking out her window, seeing the traveler cross her path, and inviting him to share her meal.

Neither her initial invitation, nor Jesus' instruction of offering a cup of water to a disciple is a large, extraordinary, heroic act requiring weeks of planning and special reserves of courage. Instead, these moments are simple, every day, basic acts of genuine welcome. And in the genuineness of the welcome - the honest, open, no-agenda, no ego involved attitude - others recognize sacred space. Then welcome and the welcomed, together, see their lives changed.

In moments of history such as ours right now, where lives and futures and life together seem at once both threatened and potentially about to burst forth, as Emilie Townes writes, "superficial hospitality alone is insufficient."<sup>2</sup> And if we are honest, we have to confess that the church has tolerated all types of exclusivity for far too long.<sup>3</sup> The welcomes of these scriptures are basic building blocks of changed lives: a cup of water, an invitation to dinner, a cry for healing, shared sorrow, a receptive ear for God's good news. Peter Storey, a leader in the Methodist Church in South Africa, once said amid their country's long journey toward healing, that they learned in the struggle that big doors swing on tiny hinges. Come in, be well, do you need a drink? A place at the table? Welcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Townes, Emilie, "Theological Perspective on Matthew 10:40-42" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Vol 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011), 193. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Goettler, William, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 10:40-42" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Vol 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011), 192.