**Welcoming Kindness**

Psalm 13
Matthew 10:40-42

Michele gave me a poke. That actually happens more often than you might think. I say something that Michele believes might be offensive and suddenly I get a little jab in the side. We were visiting Donna, a former member of Cherokee Park United, who passed away a little over a week ago. Donna had cancer.

To understand why Michele poked me, you have to understand a little about Donna. Donna had a big heart and was always willing to do things for other people. She eagerly contributed to the life of the church and for a number of years helped with our church newsletter. Donna also had a couple attributes that sometimes made her life difficult. She had a tendency to hold onto grievances, staying angry at people who had offended her. Donna was also quite set in her ways and would get angry if things did not go as she thought they should, which is in part why she chose to leave Cherokee Park United. In general, Donna was a glass half empty type of person. She fairly quickly saw the negative in things, rather than the positive.

 Most people who knew Donna thought her diagnosis of cancer 6 or 7 years ago would only add to her glass half full view of the world and be one more reason for her to feel angry. Instead, Donna handled her cancer with amazing grace. Rather than let anger consume her, she welcomed the gift of caring from friends like Mike and Lynne Bates, Jill Jackson and others. Rather than become bitter at how life had been unfair, she saw the positive in people and her situation.

 As we visited, I commented on how impressed I was by how she had been dealing with her cancer. Donna said she had changed and that she was glad she had. Donna then looked at me and said, “I’ll bet you never thought that would happen, did you?” I looked at Donna, hesitated just a bit and said, “no I didn’t”. That’s when Michele poked me.

 No one would blame the disciples if they had begun to develop a rather low expectation of what they might encounter from people as they share the Good News of God’s love and justice. Our lesson today is part of Jesus instructions to the disciples before Jesus sends them out on their own. Here is what Jesus tells them. “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves….Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me…and you will be hated by all because of my name….when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.”

 In many respects what Jesus describes sounds like the reception of the Freedom Riders who traveled by bus into the Deep South, during the Civil Rights era, challenging the discriminatory and racist practices that kept African Americans and other people of color from accessing “whites only” establishments. Everywhere the Freedom Riders went they were met by the same hostility Jesus describes for the disciples. They were beaten. They were threatened. They were put in jail. They experience hatred and anger at virtually every stop. In 2005, a Christian activist from Minnesota drew upon the model of civil rights Freedom Riders and organized Equality Rides for LGBT inclusion. Equality Riders traveled to universities and schools whose policies were particularly hostile to LGBT citizens. Although overt violence was no longer the same threat as it was for Freedom Riders, the Equality Riders also encountered the anger and hatred Jesus anticipates the disciples will face.

 Our Gospel lesson today comes from the same set of instructions given to the disciples, in which Jesus warns the disciples about the hostility and anger they will encounter. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Typically, we in the church, hear these words of Jesus as instructions that we should be gracious and generous in the hospitality and welcome we extend to others. This, of course, is important. Too often churches forget the most basic and fundamental aspects of hospitality. Most of us at some point in time have visited a church where no one bothers to acknowledge your presence. No one greets you. No one introduces themselves or invites you to fellowship. It is as if you are a shadow. It goes against the most basic instructions Jesus offers about sharing the love of God to all, without exception.

Here at Cherokee Park United we are intentional about extending the type of welcome and hospitality we would hope to receive. We encourage our members not only to say hello, but to introduce themselves, invite those visiting to join us for fellowship and to introduce guests to others. “Whoever welcomes you, welcome me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” Generous hospitality and welcome is fundamental to the message Jesus proclaims. According to Jesus, hospitality is an act of spiritual discipline in which we not only exercise good manners, but acts of welcome can become a way in which we connect with God and all that is sacred.

The problem is this particular text is not about the welcome we extend to others, but rather the welcome and the kindness we are ready to receive. “Whoever welcome you, welcomes me..Whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward,…. whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones….none of these will lose their reward.”

Donna said, “I bet you didn’t expect I would change, did you?” I had to be truthful, I didn’t. Once you have experienced people in a particular way, it is easy to begin developing your expectations of that person around those experiences. Plus, Donna was in her mid-fifties. My assumption was that by the time you get into your fifties, your life orientation is pretty well set.

 For the disciples, I can well imagine that after having been thrown in jail a few times, after having been yelled at with hatred and anger it was easy to let those negative experiences begin shaping their expectation of what they might encounter from other people. I am guessing this was a tremendous challenge for the Freedom Riders and Equality Riders as well. Before long you start developing an attitude of defensiveness, knowing and believing that this is what Southerners are all like, this is what Christian conservatives are all like, this is what the people encountered by the disciples are all like.

 It is easy to begin putting people in a box. We all do it. Someone has treated us in a particular way, they have a reputation for certain type of behavior and before long, we begin assuming and expecting this is what we will always encounter. Nowhere is this a bigger challenge than it is for people like the Freedom Riders, Equality Riders and anyone who speaks out for justice. Speaking out for justice generally means challenging the status quo, which in turn can make people hostile and angry. The angrier people get, the bitterer their response, the greater our temptation to conclude that is all there is. That is the way he or she is. That is the way they are. We can expect nothing more.

 Jesus challenges the disciples and Jesus challenges us to change our expectation. Rather than anticipate hostility, anticipate kindness. Rather than expect rejection, assume a welcome. It may only be a small act of kindness, something easily over looked, like a glass of cold water, but Jesus invites us, encourages us to look for the good, to see the possibility in people, to welcome the kindness, even when our experience has been one of rejection and hostility. Continue holding out the possibility that even in the Deep South, even on the most conservative of fundamentalist campuses, even with angry Tea Party members and even with those we are certain will never change, there is the possibility of kindness that we need to encourage and welcome.

 After honestly telling Donna that I had not expected she would change, Donna went on to tell me how glad she was this had occurred for her. She wished it had happened sooner. She knew she would have been happier if it had. But, she was glad for the change that had happened in her life. Then Donna said to me, “Don’t give up on anyone”.

 I imagine it won’t be long before I receive another poke from Michele. But, I do hope I will remember to welcome the kindness, because in welcoming the kindness, we welcome Jesus and in welcoming Jesus, we welcome the one who sent him.

**Psalm 13**

*The Psalmist is never hesitant to confess the feelings of alienation and estrangement the Psalmist sometimes feels with God. The Psalmist especially feels that estrangement from God when encountering the hostility of those who reject the love and justice of God’s ways. Yet, the Psalmist refuses to believe that hostility or feelings of separation will have the final word. Rather the trust of the Psalmist is placed in the steadfast love of God.*

How long, O God? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O God, my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because God has dealt bountifully with me.

*Hear what the spirit is saying to God’s people.*

**Matthew 10:40-42**

*Our Gospel lesson today comes from a portion of Matthew in which Jesus is getting ready to send the disciples out on a mission of their own. Jesus has already warned the disciples that many will reject both the promise and implications of God’s love and justice. They will often be greeted with hostility. Yet, rather than come to expect hostility, Jesus encourages the disciples to be prepared to welcome the kindness they are offered. According to Jesus it is in welcoming the kindness that we welcome the presence of God.*

[Jesus said:] "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

*Hear what the spirit is saying to God’s people.*