

Homily – June 28, 2026

So, I don't know if anybody was counting, but in the first two verses of the text today, the word "welcome" was used six times. So, I'm guessing that might be the theme on this text today. I don't know. What do you think? And when I think about the concept, the idea of welcome, and what it truly means to be welcoming, and when we think about who are we actually willing to welcome, I'm reminded about this internet story that went viral about, oh, 10 years ago. And it was never determined whether it was really a true story or if it's just a really good story that invites us to wrestle with who actually is welcome.

There was this church looking for a pastor, a senior pastor actually. And they were in the interview process and they found a pastor that they thought was going to be a really good fit. They wanted to make sure that pastor understood that welcoming was really one of their core values, and that if that was not something the pastor wanted to be about, it wasn't a good fit. And so, they showed him the bulletin, they showed him their welcome packet, they showed him his follow-up, they showed him everything. And they said, "You know, if this is not you, don't take the call." Well, he and they decided that they would be a good fit. And the congregation was all excited. They were going to throw the pastor and the pastor's family the best welcome they had ever encountered in their ministry life. They had the big cake. They had the big lunch. They had a goodie basket. They had everything that you can imagine, even tickets to the adventure park down the road.

And it was Sunday. And they were all out there waiting for the pastor and pastor's family to show up. And they kept waiting. And they kept waiting. And they waited some more. And they wondered, what happened? I mean, that pastor didn't seem like somebody who just wouldn't show up. If there was an accident, surely, they would have somebody call. What happened?

Well, while they were out there waiting, there was this stranger who was wandering among them, who would go up and say, "I'm thirsty. I need something to drink. I'm really hungry. I haven't eaten for 24 hours. Do you have anything to eat? I really could use some prayer. Would you mind praying with me?"

Well, most of the congregation walked away because the person had some outside odor on them. Some of them said, "Please leave. We're waiting for our new pastor, and you can't be here." Well, finally, the council president stood up and did the council president's job of sending the stranger away, telling them if they wouldn't leave, that soon the police would be called. Well, the stranger left.

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Finally, the congregation decided that they would come in to church. And the council president would say, "We don't know what happened. We'll find out. We'll let you know this week."

Well, as the congregation was about ready to leave, in walks the stranger and walks up to the altar and comes behind the pulpit and starts taking off the disguise, starts taking off the beard, starts taking off the teeth, starts taking off the crumpled clothes, and beneath it you saw a clergy collar.

The pastor said two things at that service. "Those who welcome me welcome Jesus." That was the first thing the pastor said. And the second thing: "Today's worship is concluded. Next week, we'll gather to begin together to explore what it means to follow the great commandment to love our neighbor and to welcome the stranger."

So, what does it really mean when we say we're a welcoming church? I would guess that if you asked any church if they were welcoming, they would tell you they're welcoming. I haven't encountered anyone that said, "No, we're very exclusive." But welcoming sometimes could just mean a handshake. Maybe it's a welcome gift. Maybe it's a bulletin. Maybe it's inviting you to have a seat. And those are all good starts. But if you look at the Greek meaning of the word welcome, the Greek word is *dechomai*. And what it really means is to receive Jesus. So, when we are welcoming the stranger, we actually are receiving Jesus. Jesus is here in the midst of us. When the stranger receives us, they are receiving Jesus in the midst of their life.

I had the opportunity to be at the Lahaina Resource Center, also known as Aunt Nettie's Place, this week. And I was handing out sandwiches. And I had already started to kind of unpack this text and begin to wonder where the Holy Spirit was going to take me. And the question kept coming in my mind as I handed out the sandwiches. How would I greet someone differently if I saw in them the presence of Christ in my midst? If I saw that they were the gift of Jesus to me that day, how would I interact with them differently? And it was a question that just kept rolling around in my mind.

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And I can tell you, one of the gentlemen was starting to irritate me. I got to confess. Because there was this box of snacks, and it was "take what you want." But I felt like he was being a little bit greedy. I made a judgment call, not necessarily treating him like the presence of Jesus. And then I stopped. And I realized I have the privilege to go to a grocery store and get whatever I want, whenever I want, however my budget will allow me. That person doesn't have that privilege. They got to come to a place that truly said, "You're welcome, help yourself." And so it taught me again how we see the strangers and how it will change our lens if we realize that really, actually is Jesus' presence in our midst when we encounter the stranger.

But it also puts a lot of pressure on us because it goes the other way. We too are called to be the presence of Jesus in their midst. It can be as simple as offering a cup of cold water. It doesn't have to be any big planned program, but invites us to change the way we are about those moments in ministry. It begins with a simple act of welcome. A conversation can start with an introduction. A friendship can start with an invitation, and a ministry partner can emerge because someone was willing to listen before speaking.

So in Matthew 10, we've heard the call to discipleship includes persecution. It includes division. It's costly, all of these things. But now Jesus ends this offer and invitation to discipleship with: all you have to do is show up, be the presence of me, and offer something as simple as a cup of water. May the Holy Spirit give us the power to be the presence of Jesus in this world and to receive the stranger also as the one who brings the presence of Jesus.

Amen.