

“Welcoming God’s Power”

Sermon by Renata Eustis

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Mark 6: 1-13 & 2 Cor. 12: 2-10

We’ve got two stories in our Gospel reading. And in both of them, I hear these twin themes of welcome and power. I couldn’t decide which one to go with and then I realized that welcome and power are tied together—and that’s the point.

In the first story, Jesus is getting something less than a hero’s welcome in his hometown. And it seems to be because of Jesus’s power. He’s saying and doing things that are way beyond his paygrade. Jesus acknowledges he’s not welcome. And then, interestingly, he’s not able to do anything powerful there. In that place where he’s not welcome, he’s not able to show them how powerful he is.

So, he leaves the big town and starts teaching in the smaller villages. And he transfers some of his power on to his disciples and sends them out to do the powerful things he was doing—casting out demons and healing people. He gives them some instructions about how to handle it when people don’t welcome you. So, they’re living in this mix of welcome and power, too.

Inviting someone into your home is the most obvious and tangible way of understanding welcome. But I want to look at it a little more broadly. What if we think about welcome more like receptivity and openness? What are the things that make us more or less open—and more specifically, what makes us open or receptive to God’s power?

If we look to these stories, we get some clues. First, the hometown crowd—the people who think they already know who Jesus is and what he can and can’t do. I hate to admit it—and I’m nearly 100% sure I’m not the only one—but I’m guilty of this. I rely a lot on myself and hard work and what I can do—and that is not all bad. But I think there are plenty of parts of my life and my day, where I am so busy taking care of things that I don’t even think about God being involved in those tasks.

Part of it is a wrong idea about how big and important something has to be for God to care about it. Every once in a while, I get hit over the head with how ridiculous that idea is.

This is a small—or not so small—example. I try to check on people who I haven’t seen for a while. A part of my to do list is literally just names of people—and often many of those names just get rewritten on the next list because I haven’t had time to call them. And, invariably, on a Saturday afternoon when I’m working on my sermon, I look at that list—and I feel terrible because it’s one more week of not calling and the next day is Sunday. I spend so much time thinking about the person that I might as well just have called them. But I don’t because I don’t want to get distracted from the sermon.

I can’t tell you how many times that person has been in church the next day! It is, of course, wonderful to see them. And it’s a big message to me from God that it doesn’t all depend on me—and that God cares about us in some very personal ways.

The second clue as to what makes us more open, more receptive to God’s power comes from the twelve who go out—sent by Jesus but not very well-provisioned. They haven’t packed for every possible contingency. They haven’t packed at all!

I think we’re more open and receptive to God’s power when we don’t have everything we think we need—when we don’t have all the bases covered—when we’re not on familiar ground.

I am looking to learn from those disciples because I'd have a hard time doing what they did. I'm actually ok with the being sent out part—it's the not having everything you think you need part I don't like.

We just returned from the MYLE and the Youth Gathering, so this is the experience of being sent out that is at the front of my mind. There were so many details that went into getting there—and I was way over my head in terms of managing it all. But we all got there—and there was a lot that was really good about our time in Houston—and to be completely honest, there was also a lot that was super challenging.

Yimka, the other adult leader, and I both felt a huge responsibility for bringing everyone back safe and sound. When we landed in DC, Yimka turned around and with a huge smile on her face said, "We're done!" She meant that in more ways than one.

On the plane, I was questioning some of the decisions I had made and thinking about what I would do differently next time. There were several youth whose parents were much more excited about the Youth Gathering than they were. I came to the definite decision that it was not a good idea to take someone on a trip like this unless they themselves really wanted to go. That was on Sunday night.

On Monday afternoon, I saw that one of the parents had called me. And my first reaction was, "ugh! I know something is wrong and I just can't deal with one more thing from this group." I'm not responsible for them anymore. So, I put off calling.

But then I did—and what a gift that phone call was. This mom called to thank me for the trip because she could see a real change in her child. She also told me that *she* had really been changed. I had texted the parents to tell them that the mass gatherings—the evening events that were filled with music and inspirational speakers—were being livestreamed. This mom listened to them every night. And she told me that the message that God never gives up on us came through loud and clear. She said, how can I give up on my child when God has never given up on us.

Any question I had about whether this trip was worth it just flew right out the window.

My previous conclusion that only youth who really wanted to go, should go, was in shreds. In conversations and texts throughout this past week, I heard from parents about how this trip had affected their sons and daughters. Then, on Friday, most of us got together for our first well-rested reflection on the trip—and I heard and saw for myself the impact it had had.

The impact God had had.

I was a little slow on the uptake—probably because my focus was on how hard I had worked. But when I got to the end of what I could do—and it didn't seem like it had been enough—I started being able to see what God was doing. And it changed how I was seeing everything.

God is a God who cares about people on the edges—who, on the cross, is drawing *all* people to himself. Not just the people who are appreciative or who worked hard to go on the trip. *All people*. God's power is shown in grace—in getting what you *need* not what you deserve because you worked so hard.

There is one more thing in this story about the relationship between welcoming—being open and receptive—and God's power. Some of the people welcome the disciples into their homes. They are literally open and receptive to God's power. And this openness gives them a huge gift—They experience the healing power of God in their midst—not just for themselves and their families but for others in their community.

Every night, in the mass gathering, there were several speakers. Some of them were adults but most of them were teens. When we talked about the trip, all of our teens talked about how great the speakers were—how often do you hear that?! The talks are all on YouTube, if anyone wants to listen.

One of the speakers was Marie Rose Belding who is a student at American University. When she was 14, she started MEANS database—an online platform that makes it cheaper for stores to donate their food to pantries and food banks rather than throw it away. It’s operating in 43 states—and now they have partnered with ELCA World Hunger. One of my follow-ups is to get us connected.

Marie Rose is a compelling speaker whose message is that we have hunger in the U.S. because we choose to. “Too much food. People in need. That’s dumb.” Through the online platform, MEANS has gotten 1.8 million pounds of food to hungry people in the last 3 years. That’s some powerful work—casting out that demon of hunger.

Marie Rose has a tattoo on her forearm—2 Corinthians 12: 9. It’s her favorite verse, and it’s one we read today: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” God can do amazing things through us no matter how broken we are.

Then she shared her story of brokenness—a story that was going on at the same time as she got MEANS going. She was on 10 different medications and had 9 doctors. She was a super achiever, and in addition to everything else, she was in two youth groups. But she felt inside that she was “not enough”.

Marie Rose was struggling with her sexual orientation and thought she might be gay. She lived in a community that was extremely homophobic. When she told her mentor that she thought she might be gay, he told her she was too pretty to be gay. And then he raped her and told her that now she was used and dirty and no one would ever want her. People said it was ok for him to do that because she deserved it.

Then, she gave this testimony: “They were wrong. It was not my fault. We are not what has been done to us but only what our Savior has done for us. I am not dirty. I am beloved. And I am enough. I am loved for exactly who I am.”

“MEANS exists because God’s love is like our food supply. There is enough.”

This is what it looks like when we are open to God’s power. Even in the midst of our brokenness—our weariness—our doubts and questions about whether we have enough—or are enough—precisely at this breaking point, God says, “My grace is enough, my power is complete in you.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.