

Pentecost 7—June 29, 2008
The Very Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Within the neighborhood in which I live, little 4 year-old Jake was asked by his older sister to please stop squirting her with the water gun. And as soon as she pleaded with him he pumped the handle and fired away soaking her with water. This is what most four-year old boys given their emotional development will do given the same scenario.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 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." (Matthew 10) At the core of this teaching from Jesus Christ to his disciples is the relationship of acceptance and hospitality to the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. This is not something that naturally comes to a person through their emotional development, but rather must be learned and incorporated into one's way of being. Jesus was in fact taking a very traditional Jewish teaching of the Torah, the requirement to welcome the stranger and offer comfort and hospitality, (one need just remember the story in Genesis of Abraham and Sara offering hospitality and food to the three visiting strangers) and now Christ relating it to his Good News. Jesus proclaims that central to following the Way of the Son of God is to welcome...to accept the other in his name. And that to be welcoming in such a way is to welcome Jesus himself.

One of the first impressions made upon me during my recent mission trip to Uganda was the expression used by each person that greeted me when I arrived at their home or place of business; they would say: "You are welcome!" This was said whether I was entering a moderate comfortable house, or an impoverished one-room mud brick hut in a village. "You are welcome." In the homes of those who had some means, they would ask me to sign their guest book. This lovely custom even occurred when I visited the headmaster's office of the primary and the secondary schools.

Jesus said that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) A clear and concise teaching of our Lord was that when we welcome another, accept another into our company and home, we are welcoming Christ himself. There is an implied acceptance in Christ's teaching that seems to break down the barriers which are put up to divide us. And these are barriers often imposed by Christians in the very name of Jesus. This teaching though, that appears a number of times in the Gospels, contradicts such human imposed barriers.

At the very core of our searching to be Christ-like is the requirement to accept and welcome in the name of Jesus. "You are welcome." How can we live out this teaching?

Apparently St. Paul believes that that we cannot live in such a way until we move away from sin and live under the grace of Jesus Christ. Sin, as Paul rightly claims inhibits and limits our ability to live the Christian life that God intends. How can we practice Christian hospitality and acceptance if within our personal or corporate lives we submit to sinfulness and unrighteousness? "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6: 12:23)

Both hospitality and acceptance are challenging for you in a very busy and often impersonal world. Sometimes our natural tendencies want to protect or isolate ourselves from others—perhaps even criticize and marginalize them in order to what I would call self-preserve. Have you ever found yourself quickly walking in the opposite direction of someone that is approaching you in need? Do you screen your phone calls and not answer the one that you know is calling because they need to talk? This is not an indictment of either you or me, but rather points to the truth of the difficulty of practicing this central teaching of our Lord—"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:42)

I'll close this morning with the following story written by Philip Gulley in his book: Front Porch Tales. "When I was in the 4th grade, I was offered a job as a paper boy. It didn't pay much money, but I knew having a job would build my character so I took it, good character being important to 4th graders. My lessons started the first day on the job. A customer paying his bill asked me if I wanted a tip, and I said "Sure." He said, "Stay away from wild women."

One of my customers was a lady named Mrs. Stanley. She was a widow and not prone to wild living, so I took to lingering on her front porch during my rounds. She'd watch for me to come down her street, and by the time I pedaled up to her house, there'd be a slushy bottle of Coke waiting for me. I'd sit and drink while she talked. That was our understanding—I drank she talked.

The widow Stanley talked mostly about her dead husband, Roger. "Roger and I went grocery shopping this morning over to the IGA," she'd say. The first time she said that, the Coke went up my nose. That was back in the days when Coke going up your nose wasn't a crime, just a mite uncomfortable.

Went home and told my father about Mrs. Stanley and how she talked as if Mr. Stanley were still alive. Dad said she was probably lonely, and that maybe I just ought to sit and listen and nod my head and smile, and maybe she'd work it out of her system. So that's what I did. I figured that was where the character building came into play. Turned out after a few summers, she seemed content to leave her husband at the South Cemetery...

I quit my paper route after her healing. Moved on to the lucrative business of lawn mowing. Didn't see the widow Stanley for several years. Then we crossed paths up at the Christian Church's annual fund-raiser dinner. She was standing behind the stream table spooning out mashed potatoes and looking radiant. Four years ago she'd had to bribe her paper boy with a Coke to have someone to talk with; now she had friends brimming over. Her husband was gone, but life went on. She had her community and was luminous with love.

Community is a beautiful thing; sometimes it even heals and makes us better than we would otherwise be.

I live in the city now. My front porch is a concrete slab. And my paper boy is a lady named Edna with three kids and a twelve-year-old Honda. Every day she asks me how I'm doing. When I don't say "fine," she sticks around long enough to find out why. She's such a nice lady that sometimes I act as if I have a problem, just so she'll tarry. She's lived in the city all her life, but she knows community, too.

Community isn't so much a locale as it is a state of mind. You find it whenever folks ask you how you're doing because they care, and not because they're getting paid to inquire.

Two thousand years ago, a church elder named Peter wrote the recipe for community. "Above all else, he wrote, "hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins." (I Peter 4:8) That means when you love a person, you occasionally have to turn a blind eye toward their shortcomings.

Kind of like why my dad told me about the widow Stanley. Sometimes it's better to nod your head and smile.

Psychiatrists call that "enabling denial," but back when I delivered papers, we called it "compassion."

Christian hospitality and acceptance as the Gospel of the Lord.....Amen.