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Welcome From Outside

I had not found a place to live. The fact that I was only going to be there for a year and was not going to be paid much as a vicar or an intern (I was still a student after all) made it somewhat difficult to find somewhere. For the first weeks of my time in Minnesota I stayed in the home of a couple I had never met. They were serving the church overseas in retirement, as interim Pastor at Bratislava International Church, and serving folks here, by opening up their home up on a bluff in St. Paul to people who needed a place to land for a while. I wasn't the only one who benefited from their generosity. Months later I would learn of another family who got to stay there while they adjusted to a new place.

At the end of my time at Christ on Capitol Hill I decided to stay a month past my lease to cover for my supervising Pastor while she traveled to Tanzania with the St. Paul Area Synod of the ELCA. Did you know there are only two countries in the entire world with more Lutherans than Tanzania? (One is Germany and the other is Ethiopia) I needed a place to stay. Again someone opened up their home. Letting me stay there.

Our Slovak friends are experiencing this right now. Families of Grace have been opening up their homes and inviting our guests to stretch out and rest amid all their work, finding a spacious place to lay their heads, as they navigate a new place, culture, and relationships.

When we are on the receiving end of hospitality it can feel risky. We are in a position of vulnerability. It can be uncomfortable. When we are welcomed from outside of ourselves it can throw us off balance. Like asking for help. It can almost seem unnatural.

Anthony the great, a monk and desert father said "It is better to receive hospitality than to give it." No wonder when I posted that on Facebook years ago someone responded "It's backwards!" Like the gospel.

Jesus speaks to his disciples about *welcome*. The word is used six times in two verses. Priest Debbie Thomas writes, "it can seem to be only about how we are to welcome others." Easy. At least we try. She continues "But Jesus's message is not that simple. The instructions he gives his disciples in this passage are not about *extending* welcome. They're about *receiving* welcome. They're about what it looks like and feels like for followers of Jesus to accept welcome in Jesus's name." As someone else pointed out, in Matthew's gospel often the phrase little one's like at the end of our periscope is used to not only refer to children, but to all disciples of Jesus. *Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to a disciple.*

Paul says that we have been (past tense) set free from sin. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. In baptism, we have been clothed with that eternal life, himself. As we have been joined to Christ- his death and resurrection. His righteousness is now our clothing. Garments that we can stretch out and relax in. Given the gift of faith we have been welcomed into God's spacious presence and made God's beloved children. Forgiveness, mercy, and grace is ours not because of anything we have done or could do, not by mustering up enough piety inside of us, conjuring up enough good thoughts or meeting some kind of standard, either set by ourselves or someone else, but by the Word- Jesus Christ that comes from outside of ourselves. This word that speaks from outside creates new worlds and a new future beyond our narrow imaginations.

It sounds like this, "Your sins are forgiven" "the body of Christ given for you." "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." "You are not alone." "This is not the end." "Jesus Christ is alive." "Death is the gate into eternal life." "It is not up to you." "Stop trying to save yourself."

A million other words too that tear down those walls that keep you stuck and open you up into the vast expanse of our savior. You know them when you hear them. Your ears have been attuned in those still generative waters to the word. You have been welcomed from outside.

"It is better to receive hospitality than to give it." Baptized folks know this in the core of our being.

Given eternal life apart from works, from outside of ourselves, we now *get* to receive good news like a cup of cold water. Even a place to live- literally or metaphorically from prophets, witnesses outside ourselves and our worlds. With the Holy Spirit living in us this risky, vulnerable, sometimes uncomfortable practice of letting ourselves receive hospitality and *help* from others becomes a joy. Day by day we die to our own ego and rise to new life over and over. We can do this by opening ourselves up in curiosity and genuine interest to those who see things differently: politically, theologically, or otherwise. Easy to say, not as easy to do. I know from experience. I have to die to my need to be right more often than I care to admit. We are sinners all of us. Sinners and saints.

As often as we die to ourselves we find on the other side of every grave- life abundant. And space. For them and for us to be in the house of God. No competing for space in the life of the triune God.

In the words of Ben Stewart, "what does that salvific speciality feel like/look like for you? What is it like to drop your hands and stretch into the eternal life that is yours? Not overlooking a bluff, but a field of tomorrow's unfolding beyond our narrow expectations/efforts. Who has invited you to fall into a place like that before?"

We will find Christ disguised in the faces of strangers a hundred-fold- offering gifts, surprises, help, and room. God promises it. Take a chance. Drink a cup of cold water from outside yourself- and be refreshed.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.