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5 Pentecost, Year A  
Grace, River Forest  
6/28/2026

*A Welcome Relief*

As I mentioned before I began preaching Sunday- I (along with many of you I think) found it incredibly meaningful and appropriate that on the first Sunday after Dean completed his baptismal journey that we had a gospel text dripping with welcome. Six times in two verses! What a gift to remember someone who embodied welcome so profoundly and is literally the reason why so many are still a part of our community.

The joy was palpable. Upbeat (thanks to a drum circle) and billows of incense rising upward in thanksgiving, along with rainbow ribbons on the thurible as smoke filled the sanctuary. It was January 20th 1990. 19 years before the Lutheran Church would officially change its policy. Jeff Johnson, Phyllis Zillhart and Ruth Frost- three out queer children of God were ordained. They were ordained against church policy, yet faithful to the call that God had placed on their lives in the waters of baptism, and the congregations that stepped out in faith. Not long after- Jeff, Phyllis, and Ruth, and those congregations were removed from the official rolls- only to be completely reinstated in 2009 when the ELCA officially welcomed LGBT folks into ordained ministry.

In our two verses from Matthew today the word *welcome* appears 6 times. The task of welcome can be risky. It invites complexity and difference. In a Wednesday Journal article featuring the hospitality exemplified in the home of Dean and Beverly Lueking, Dean speaks of the interplay of welcome-- the give and take of it all. Welcoming people from around the world and over 30 foster children. Dean said “We open ourselves to them, and vice versa.” When our welcome is rooted in Jesus Christ something new begins to take shape that is a gift to all involved. We discover new things about others and this world God loves and about ourselves. We become changed in it all.

Last week, the supreme court cleared the way for the ending of temporary protective status for over a million people living in the US. This will affect Syrian and Haitian refugees as well as potentially those from Venezuela, Honduras, Afghanistan and Nepal. Many who have already experienced pain, loss, and struggle in their lives. Often they work in jobs that we deem as “essential” without the honor they deserve.

Welcome can be a loaded concept in our world of borders and boundaries. Too often, our imaginations, warped by sin and death, stay too small in the face of the mosaic of humanity that God is creating in our midst. Instead of stretching out our arms and sharing what we have, we

become protective of an ideal past or we get caught up in the myths that tempt us to believe that different means deficient or dangerous, or that there just isn't room for that here.

When we are lulled into these illusions we miss out on that dance of hospitality/mutuality/welcome that Dean modeled so well. We miss out on discovering more about ourselves that can only be brought out by others. "We open ourselves to them, and vice versa."

To get to the heart/root/source of our welcome, we have to go back to the beginning. Our beginning. In the waters of baptism each of us have been welcomed wholly and completely into the eternal life of the Triune God by grace alone. Just as we are. Exactly as we are. Today and forever. No strings attached. No fine print. No asterisks. No unless, or until, or if only. No cookie-cutter mold of faithfulness. No conditions. Just welcomed.

Core to the joy and risk of welcome is that we are welcomed in our own bodies, with all of the things that make us "us." Our "usness" As the waters flow through us we do not become less ourselves, but by God's grace we become more and more ourselves as we grow in God's garden-nourished by the spirit. Relaxing into fertile soil.

When Jeff, Ruth, and Phyllis were called to ministry they were called because of who they were, not in spite of it. The same is true for each of us. As I was reminded the other day-- "all of us are called to ministry, we are baptized." We have each been called to countless vocations, living a life of ministry in the places we have been planted. We live this call at our day jobs, where we volunteer, at little league fields, in board rooms and grocery stores, food pantries and classrooms, in our family's, friendships and among strangers. Each of us has something to offer that cannot be replicated or automated- or even replaced by artificial intelligence, because there is nothing artificial about you or the waters of baptism. Sometimes it is you that other people need. We never retire from that call. It may change, or morph, or evolve, but it persists. Just like the voice that spoke over us in those waters and echoes throughout every season of our lives.

So what daily work of yours either joy or toil deserves to be blessed as a kind of ministry under the sign of the cross. And what would it be like for you to do that daily work of toil or joy, suffering or blessing, knowing that God's hand has been placed over you and you have been called and equipped for that very moment. Almost like an ordination.

In the reign of God/that verdant and unwieldy garden- no act of serving, advocating, protesting, accompanying, listening, ministry, love, or welcome is too insignificant. In God's economy often it's the smallest gestures that mean the most. Like offering a cup of cold water to a little child. What are the things you do that are blessed that are like offering a cup of cold water to a little child, never seen by others, but known by God.

What about the prophet's reward? Dean helped us here too. It's the gift of knowing and being known, meeting, and being changed by others. Finding out that you are a part of a community that crosses every barrier that we attempt to put up. It's chosen family. Belonging. Kinship. A new creation.

Like Lawrence, Kansas and the Algerian National Team. Where Lawrence has embraced them, and vice versa as Dean would say. Algerian flags lined the streets, the KU marching band learned the national anthem, and donned their jerseys. As one person said "We're over the moon they've come here and are part of our community. We're loving it!"

Jesus promises, you will never lose that reward. It is your baptismal birthright. Sealed with the cross and joined indelibly to one another.

To paraphrase Dean in an article he wrote just after the Pulse Nightclub massacre a few years ago - "the good news for all of us is that, when battling whatever might keep us from our neighbors is that we have a place with others (them) in the parade that marches on with love to keep us in step, upbeat and hopeful as we go."