

Sermon “True Welcome”
Kirk of St James
Sunday June 28, 2026
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For the past few years, the presbytery has had a student working on her Master of Divinity as the rural and remote student at the West Point and Richmond Bay Charge. Over time as we have gotten to know one another sharing drives to meetings, discussing church politics, and so on we have also become friends. So, it is not unusual if she is flying out for something she might stay at our house overnight if she is taking the early morning flight out of Charlottetown. Now that we have been friends for the last three years, I joked I no longer vacuum or make sure everything is perfect before she arrives, she said she looks forward to the next level of friendship which is when you stay over and have to do chores.

When I was thinking of the word welcome for this week, one of the things that struck me was the thought that I used to equate welcome with perfection. So, if like us you have a lot of company in the summer it means a spotless home, planned menu, curated excursions etc. The thing is it is often not authentic--it can be a veneer. I would rather people come in, make themselves at home, root around in the fridge, and get comfortable, rather than sit there hungry because the next planned gastronomical delight isn't until 6:30.

There is also the idea in our society where the importance of welcome is more transactional. So, for example, public facing roles want to make sure they are perceived as welcoming and helpful. When I worked in a clothing store you were supposed to welcome customers within thirty seconds not because it was friendly but because they wanted to make

sure we were capturing sales. In the food service industry, you work hard on presentation and check out because you want repeat sales. We welcome and we offer hospitality because it can mean more sales, more customers, etc. Then one year I went to work for a boss who viewed it from a completely different angle. She considered welcome and therefore hospitality as one of the most important aspects of a faith community. She modeled this through how she received people, how she treated them, and how she welcomed them. It is a defining piece of her identity and work ethic to this day. While as staff we would sometimes be frustrated when people stopped in without an appointment or resent them arriving when we felt it was "our" downtime she never turned anyone away. No matter the time or how inopportune she made sure to welcome visitors for tea, coffee and a snack. No one ever felt unwelcome when she was there. It was interesting because over time the staff began to model her behaviour without thinking about it. They would see a car roll in and automatically put the teapot on. They would see people arriving when they were about to leave and instead of rolling their eyes held open the door. Hospitality became a part of life not because it was transactional but because it was caring and compassionate.

While some people may reduce hospitality and welcome to basic good manners biblical scholars view it differently in our bible story today. As one wrote while reflecting on Matthew 10:40-42 "In just a few short sentences of power and compassion, we are challenged to think more deeply about what is meant by welcoming one another. It is only after doing so that we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us...Reviewing the list from verses 40-42, we realize that this welcome can and should be

performed by us at any time and is not confined to large heroic acts by those eligible for saint hood. The simple, basic acts of kindness we perform in genuine welcome of one another are all that God asks of us. We must look around us to see who is in need and then do something about it." In other words, hospitality is a form of service to Christ.

Throughout the church year we explore and talk about the teachings of Christ which include love, kindness, compassion, and now hospitality. While these things sound perfectly easy, Jesus knows how hard we sometimes need to work to achieve them consistently. Throughout his time with the disciples Jesus had to remind them repeatedly that all are welcome at his table, and no one is excluded. Even though they heard that message countless times situations would arise where the disciples would lose sight of their call.

For example, when children approached Jesus and the disciples began to turn them away, or when an unnamed woman interrupted their supper. That is the reality of the holy/human paradox. Emile Townes the Professor of African American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School observes that "Our will to achieve caring relationships is within our grasp, yet all too often, if left to our devices, we fall short of creating and nurturing the genuine relationships in which we develop into the people God calls us to be. Pride, ego, self-doubt, and their kin keep us from connecting with each other except in self-interested ways. Therefore, we need God's embrace in our lives to live in this paradox and fulfill our faith, living in compassionate welcome with one another and extending genuine hospitality. In these four short verses, Jesus helps us steer away from distorting others and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, and unjustified hopes."

The honest reality of hospitality and welcome is that sometimes it is complete joy and other times it can feel like a chore. We are called to welcome all people through the grace filled love of God who welcomes us just as we are. "God's hospitality teaches us that close, loving, enduring relationships are to be valued along with distant, occasional, and abrasive ones--as difficult as the latter ones may be. This lively and sometimes maddening dynamic is the welcome Jesus speaks of in today's passage." We strive to live in this kind of welcome.

While I was reading one author mentioned that this type of welcome is about more than superficial hospitality. It is one that claims our time, our compassion, and our care. It is one that sometimes requires repentance because it also requires turning from systems and behaviours that are exclusive or unwelcoming.

As we are aware we are currently living in a world that feels uncertain on many fronts. We are seeing an unprecedented number of refugees fleeing unimaginable situations. We are seeing war, famine, and unrest around the world. We are struggling to understand how to respond. Several years ago, I came across an interesting article on Paddington Bear called *The Story of the Refugee and a Message of Kindness*.

Paddington Bear was originally written based on the trauma of WWII and the plight of the refugee. The author Michel Bond was struck by newsreel footage of the Nazi's forcing people out of their homes. Michel himself went to war when he was 17 and it left a deep and lasting mark on his life. He witnessed firsthand the trauma of people being forced to flee with little more than a suitcase and a couple of dollars in their pocket and then watched as they were forced to build a new life, in a new place, far from home and everything that they knew.

Now if you remember the story of Paddington, you may remember that he travelled illegally by boat with a tag around his neck. That image of the tag was based on Bond's encounters with children being sent out of the city by train with little more than a luggage tag around their neck waiting to be picked up by people they did not know. Paddington is lucky in the sense that the Brown family finds him and takes him in. Playwright Michael Morpurgo believes these images make the Paddington Bear story as relevant today as it was when it was first written. He commented "*We only have to see that bear to see the predicament of a Syrian child. The Brown family adopted him, it was a messy adoption, but it gave the bear a home. It delivers a very strong message about how we've grown away from the kindness to which we once aspired.*" *Generations of people have stood in Paddington's shoes with little more than a suitcase, a luggage tag, and the vague hope that things might get better.*

Being welcoming can be a lot of things--it can be messy, sometimes difficult, sometimes it is joyful--all of it is sanctified by God. Bond encouraged us to see people in a new light, not as scary, not as other, but simply as another human needing welcome and love. In Paddington's world all he needed was a hug and a marmalade sandwich.

Jesus calls us to welcome everyone. It is important for us to always think about how we can continue to welcome people in ways that are positive and life-giving. "Hospitality rooted in compassionate welcome is both a practice and a spiritual discipline in which we discover that by offering hospitality we may be welcoming something or someone new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives. This requires us to recognize another's gifts and vulnerabilities, the need for shelter and sustenance, and encourages us to open our worldviews and perspectives as

well as our hearts and souls.” That type of compassionate welcome sits at the heart of what Jesus called us to do—to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. So how can we continue to welcome others, and what ministries or new ministries is God calling us to?