

How do we become Welcoming?

7 Pentecost A/Proper 8

In our culture we have a saying, “Don’t shoot the messenger!” It implies that messengers should not be blamed (or praised) for the actions of their masters. In the ancient world, however, a messenger or apostle was linked more closely to the sender. For example, the Mishnah, the ancient compendium of Jewish law, states that “a man’s agent is like himself” (Mishnah, *Berakhot* 5.5). In his writing and sending of letters, Paul had to rely on this custom, to ensure the proper delivery of his messages among his churches (Philippians 2:25). In the same way, Jesus explains that welcoming an apostle is equivalent to welcoming that apostle’s master. Jesus makes the connection from the apostles back to himself (“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me”), but also from Jesus back to God (“whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”).

This chain of senders and sent ones became the backbone of the early Christian idea of “apostolic succession,” which was articulated especially by Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century. Irenaeus wrote that to prevent the Christian message from being threatened it was necessary to trace an unbroken line of authority from the current bishops back to the apostles, Jesus and God. It was a way to authenticate their message. Don’t shoot the messenger unless the message does not uphold the tradition of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” found in the creeds.

This close connection between disciples representing their Lord points to a challenge for contemporary disciples. Disciples of Jesus are Christians. They are to be welcomed as those sent by Jesus to the world. In turn, the disciple is to welcome ordinary Christians defined as “the little ones” in the gospel.

Today, in order to authenticate who Christians represent it takes more scrutiny of their message. Words are not enough to prove your identity. Not all messages were welcomed from the prophets either – Jesus being the extreme case in point. Today the message of Jesus must be delivered in Technicolor, in thought, word and deed in as many ways as possible so the one who sent the messenger will not be mistaken.

In this Christian church we believe there is an apostolic succession for bishops, priests and deacons. I am glad that the bishop who ordained me was sound in his teaching and was faithful. Is there not a spiritual succession for all of God’s people? Should there not be?

As the baptized, every one of us become the vicars of Christ to welcome those who seek Him. It should be understood then that the message of faith and practice we bear is consistent with being one of Jesus followers. We represent the One who sent us to live the faith of Jesus. How can the world expect anything less?

In his book, *The Year of Living Biblically*, A.J. Jacobs, a writer, attempted to take at face value all the rules and commands of the entire Bible and keep them. The results were humorous and interesting.

Jacobs read through the Bible for four straight weeks, five hours a day, and compiled a list of “every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice” he found in both the Old and New Testaments. When he finished, he had a list that ran 72 pages with more than 700 rules. Jacobs saw that some of the rules would be good for him — things like telling the truth, not coveting, not stealing, and loving neighbors, for example. But, like those of us who waded through Leviticus and its ilk, he saw plenty of rules that didn’t seem to make people righteous at all; stuff like not eating fruit from a tree planted less than five years ago or paying the wages of a worker every day. Then there are those biblical rules that are just plain illegal today, like killing magicians and sacrificing oxen. He thought that maybe the last one is okay if you call it “grilling.”

Jacobs had to establish some criteria for which ones he could actually follow. Like a good student, he figured that there were certain rules that were unquestionably figurative or symbolic, like Matthew 19:12, which is all about eunuchs, especially those who “have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Jacobs decided that anything that involved voluntary donation of body parts should probably not be part of his quest.

He revised his list of rules and set out to live the Biblical life literally under the name of “Jacob.” He grew out his beard and hair to the point that he looked like Moses (Ecclesiastes 9:8) and making sure not to wear any clothing of mixed fibers (Leviticus 19:19). To be safe, he had his wardrobe examined by a *shatnez* tester — kind of like an orthodox Jewish forensics expert who looks at the fibers under a microscope. He walked around with money rubber-banded around his hand (Deuteronomy 14:25). He could watch TV, but he couldn’t actually turn it on so as not to have *made* a graven image. He “stoned” an adulterer in the park, but since the Bible doesn’t specify how big the stones are supposed to be he just tossed pebbles at an admitted (and annoyed) adulterer on a park bench.

Jacobs, a self-proclaimed agnostic, went about as far as anyone can in adopting a literal biblical lifestyle, but even then he couldn't literally or legally follow all the rules. Religions and rules cannot all be completely static. The Amish, whom Jacob visited as part of his project, have evolved with the times, even if to a very small degree. He was shocked to find, for example, an Amish woman using a gas-powered leaf blower and an Amish teen rollerblading down a country road.

He argues for cafeteria style religion. "There's nothing wrong with choosing. Cafeterias aren't bad per se. I've had some great meals at cafeterias. I've also had some turkey tetrazzini that gave me the dry heaves for 16 hours. The key is in choosing the right dishes. You need to pick the nurturing ones (compassion), the healthy ones (love thy neighbor), not the bitter ones. Religious leaders don't know everything about every food, but maybe the good ones can guide you to what is fresh."

In our denomination we teach biblical authority in the form of a triangle. As handed down to us by the Anglican divine, Richard Hooker, the authority of Scripture is to be held in tension with Tradition and Reason. Each side of the triangle is necessarily equal if we are to have a balanced understanding of how God would have us live. No matter what your theological bent, it's indeed possible to commit idolatry on the Bible itself as well as the Prayer Book. Worshiping the words instead of understanding the times and embracing the spirit (Spirit!) in which it was written is our challenge in being authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. More importantly, as Christians' we've been given a model of thought and behavior that transcends written rules. We have been given Jesus. If we're looking to be literal at anything, we should be most literal in modeling our lives after his.

Some modern pastors have found literal inspiration in the command of Jesus to give a cup of cold water. The Rev. Robin Hoover, for example, began the Humane Borders project to provide water to migrants dying in the desert of southwestern Arizona ("The canteen man of the US-Mexico border," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 22, 2007). In Hoover's interpretation, he is serving the needs of these Christians, who kneel and pray to God before crossing the border — only to face dying of thirst through hundreds of miles of desert. He does research to find out when and where they are dying in the greatest numbers, and his organization provides free, fresh water there in well-marked cisterns. To the challenge that he is encouraging the migrants, Hoover curtly replies, "No one comes here

just to drink water.” He knows that he cannot do much about immigration policy anyway, so he does what he *can* do for the Christian travelers where he lives. He provides literally no more than a cup of water. And Jesus promises he will receive his reward.

This past May, my Robyn and I met some local pastors and their people reaching out to their own in Los Cabos, Mexico. Looking for work that is non-existent in this resort city, people from overcrowded Mexico City are leaving there, migrating to wherever they can find hope. We saw the local Roman Catholic parish providing a meal for children and their mothers in the church’s neighborhood kitchen. We met a woman named Donna, from San Diego, who single handedly brings water, food, clothing and whatever she can get from US churches to the migrants of Los Cabos. She works with two local Protestant churches there one of which works directly with neighborhoods that have no running water, no sewer, no electric and only shelter made from scrap metal, plastic and wood. We were able to help Donna, Pastors Alberto and Jonathan and their wives for a few days. We saw there compassion and love for these people whose spirit and face is that of Jesus. They are reaching the parents with Christ’s love through the children. The cup of cold water takes on a new meaning for us.

What form does that cup of water take for you and me at Trinity church? The cup of cold water has taken many forms and in many ways has been passed and filled so that many have drunk from it and been welcomed by Jesus himself. How else might we welcome the little ones in our midst? Might we begin right here in our worship service when someone new comes to visit and they have no idea what to do? Do we go on talking to our friends or do we begin to develop “the mindful life” that is aware that that we do get visitors who are not Episcopalians and might we ask them if they need help. What cup of water do we have for them? Who will help them drink from the same cistern we enjoy? Whoever welcomes them, will have their reward.

Help us to live authentically Lord Jesus. Open our hearts to be looking for new ways to be a welcoming church. Open our eyes to see that in doing so, we welcome you. Amen.