

4TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

**READ:
MATTHEW
10:40-42**

“Whoever welcomes
you welcomes me...”

REFLECT:

Sometimes when Carolyn and I are away on holiday I drag her along to church. I quite like experiencing different styles of worship and being an anonymous visitor in a church somewhere new. Once, on a big trip to the USA, I decided I wanted to see what a Lutheran church was like, so we turned up at a large, grand building in San Francisco on Sunday morning and stepped inside. We were directed to the basement where tea and coffee were being served before the service.

We didn't stay long and left before the service began. Somehow, we just felt unwelcome. Maybe we misread the atmosphere, I can't even think what happened (or didn't happen) to put us off. It just seemed like we had intruded into a space where we weren't supposed to be.

The following week we were in Nashville, Tennessee. A free local bulletin we picked up at

our hotel had a notice about another Lutheran church that was hosting a screening of a documentary about feminism. Wow, church and feminism, two of my favourite things! I persuaded a reluctant Carolyn that we should go.

Our experience there was such a contrast. The welcome was warm and sincere. We got chatting to a church member who had relocated to Nashville from San Francisco, and when we named the church we had tried there he exclaimed “Oh, no! Honey, those are the *wrong* kind of Lutherans.” The folks from the Nashville church invited us to come back on Sunday for worship and stay afterwards for their thanksgiving potluck meal, which we gladly did. That first church member even gave us his card and said that if we were ever back in Nashville we’d be welcome to stay at his house.

It’s difficult to see our own familiar, beloved churches through a newcomer’s eyes. For a person unused to church, or carrying bad experiences of church, it takes real courage to venture in. If they do they’re likely to be sensitive to cues that indicate whether they’re welcome (which is why, “I’m sorry but that’s *so-and-so’s* seat” is a particular bugbear of mine). This is something we need to factor in as we make plans for a return to our church buildings. Even if there are ways we can gather, will the space be welcoming? What are the implications of having to maintain social distancing? Of not being able to offer hospitality in the ways we’re accustomed to? Even, potentially, having to turn people away when we’ve reached a certain capacity?

Today’s passage reminds us that hospitality is central to mission, and that mission is the true purpose of the Church. In welcoming the stranger, we might welcome Christ himself. In this ‘sending out’ though the disciples are the recipients, not the providers, of hospitality. It’s a very different dynamic. The power lies with the host, and the disciples are the vulnerable ones stepping into unfamiliar, potentially hostile spaces.

I wonder, how might we extend hospitality in our current situation? How might we receive it? How are we called to be vulnerable, to step into unfamiliar territory to build relationships and demonstrate love? Lots, here, for us to ponder and pray on as we review and re-imagine our ministry in these strange new times.

PRAY:

- For all who are lost, lonely, rejected or hurt.
- For all who yearn for a place to worship or belong.
- For courage and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we discern our next steps together.

RESOURCES AND CONTACTS:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

If you need any help, have a prayer request, or would like someone to talk to; please contact your elder or one of us:

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