

**Proper 8Ai – June 29, 2014**  
**Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**  
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In our gospel we hear Jesus say, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” This call to radical welcome—a deeper welcome and a wider embrace—is at the heart of our Scriptures, from beginning to end. For example, the book of Leviticus states, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you” (19:33-34a). And in Deuteronomy we read, “God...loves the strangers, giving them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:18-19). The Hebrew Prophets measured the quality and character of their people by assessing how they dealt with the poor, especially widows and orphans, as well as foreigners and strangers - people on the margins. The primary message of the prophets was not that people had neglected Scripture, or had forgotten attendance at the Temple, or even worshipped false gods; but rather, that the people had forgotten those on the edge, and therefore, they had also forgotten God. Without doing justice in relationship to such people on the margins, asserted the prophets, God remains unknown. And as one rabbinic source proclaimed, “When God created the first humans, He made them out of the dust of the four corners of the earth so that no nation may say ‘Our ancestors preceded yours.’”

And in the New Testament, in our gospels Jesus says today and elsewhere, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”<sup>ii</sup> Or, later in Matthew’s gospel we hear “When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you...?” and God’s response, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (25:38, 40).<sup>iii</sup> And finally, we hear, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,”—this call from the Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) is at the heart of all our Scriptures. And some 500 years after those words were recorded, St. Benedict wrote a Rule of life for his community of fellow monks that included, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.”

Underlying these texts is an even deeper Scriptural understanding that as every human being is made in the “image and likeness of God” we are thus sacred.<sup>iv</sup>—and not only sacred, but social. We realize our dignity in relationship with others—we are made for community. As we all find our true humanity through our dependence on God and interdependence with one another—we see also in the Incarnation, that God took on human form in Jesus; and that through His work of redemption for all, every human being became the brother or sister of Jesus the Son, and was adopted as God’s child. We are thus all brothers and sisters, even with strangers...even with those considered enemies.<sup>v</sup>

Could these texts be any clearer? And yet how hard they are to live out fully. Their messages are most timely as we discern our role as a community of faith and citizens of both Christ’s Kingdom as well as this pluralistic nation—our great melting-pot, or pressure cooker, depending on how you look at it. Along with our astoundingly diverse immigrant

(and native) heritage, we celebrate our society's commitment to the rule of law, and especially its commitment to equal protection under the law. Consistent with these Biblical mandates and ever-widening societal embrace, together these make our nation a beacon of opportunity and hope—though, there is plenty of room for improvement, both in our laws and protections.

If we scratch the surface of our own family histories, many of us would find some amazing variety in the ways our hard-working parents or more distant ancestors made it to this country – and it wouldn't be all legal and above board. And as Civil Rights leader, Bayard Rustin put it, "We may have gotten here on different ships, but we are all in the same boat." And if, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, "Justice delayed is justice denied;"<sup>vi</sup> so then, for example, if not now, when *is* the time to engage in comprehensive immigration reform that not only secures our borders, *but also* offers a path towards citizenship for the millions of our law abiding, hardworking, albeit otherwise undocumented neighbors who have added to the social fabric and economic base in this country over many years? How is it that the people who harvest our crops and process our food, who buss the tables and wash the dishes, who clean our offices and even take care of our children—how is it that these people—some full citizens, many who are legal resident aliens, and many others, some 12 million of our neighbors who are otherwise undocumented, who have been responsible, hard-working individuals and families, and who deserve a path toward full citizenship—and how is it that peace-loving and law-abiding groups, such as the vast majority of Muslims in this country— how is it that all these millions of our *neighbors*, these brothers and sisters of ours, have now become the "other," "them versus us"—even the "enemy"—because some hate radio or TV host, or opportunistic politician or nativist says so?

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." God calls us to a deeper welcome and a wider embrace based not only on the realization that we are all truly interrelated as beloved children of God, but also because of who God is and the fact that Christ lived and died for all, not just some. For God is a God of mercy as well as justice; as the hymn goes, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty." God calls us to justice and to respect the rule of just laws, make no mistake about that – but God calls us also to mercy. If there's a line - it is just a fine line – between justice and mercy. We humans struggle endlessly with how, when and if to extend justice or mercy, as if they were mutually exclusive. Well, we who are gathered here, worship and serve a God who loves justice and mercy equally—and calls us to do the same—and who invites everyone to the Lord's Table, as well as many other tables. Again, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it:

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny...Together we must learn to live as brothers [and sisters] or together we will be forced to perish as fools...In a real sense, all life is interrelated. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother [and sister]. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."<sup>vii</sup>

Our Baptismal Covenant calls each of us in our generation to see the divine image in, and respect the dignity of, every human being—and thus, we can say “Amen” to the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams’ observation that in Baptism we are bound together in “solidarities not of our own choosing.”<sup>viii</sup> Now, if that is at the heart of who, and whose, we are as children of God and followers of Christ and members of his Church, then exercising such “radical welcome” involves more than a Sunday smile. It involves welcoming the stranger, supporting all that strengthens individual and family life, including, for example, showing support for and solidarity with our hard-working neighbors seeking a path to citizenship; and also supporting work going on around the world and closer to home, with refugees and families displaced by repressive regimes and war-torn regions.<sup>ix</sup>

As we continue to wrestle with these local, national and international ways of extending radical welcome in society and in our churches, I’m reminded, finally, of another powerful Biblical text, this line from the Letter to the Hebrews, “Let us then go to [Jesus] *outside the camp* and bear the abuse he endured (13:13).” This passage says that we welcome one another not just at the Baptismal font, or altar or sanctuary, but *outside the camp* as it were, which in the Bible meant both a place that was unsafe (beyond the camp confines or later, the city walls) and a place of shame and reproach where the blasphemers and rabble-rousers, prophets and Sabbath-breakers were stoned—the place outside the city walls where Jesus himself was crucified with criminals on either side. Those today who share the way of Jesus can expect to follow and worship and serve him “outside the camp”—beyond our comfort zones, in all the places of despair, distress, and urgency in our communities and in the wider world. Christian institutions that seek to be true to the call of Jesus Christ must, as a first priority, respond to people within and *beyond* the membership who suffer hardship and dislocation, and who find themselves vulnerable or ignored. The Church is one of the few institutions that, as former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple insisted, exists *not primarily* for the benefit of its members, but for those outside its “walls.” Of course, we ourselves, after all, are really outsiders as well. We are broken ones who come together to be healed, forgiven, strengthened, and to express our gratitude to God for all we have been given; as we then reach out to others “outside the camp.” Having said that, the life and work of a deeper welcome and a wider embrace by the gathered community within our walls has meaning and value both in itself as a community of celebration and mutual care, *and also* as it occurs in order to better connect to God’s purpose for the greater and common good “outside the camp.” As Jesus put it, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See also Proper 17C

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 10:40; cf. Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48; 10:16; John 13:20.

<sup>iii</sup> Along with our Biblical heritage, we have a rich immigrant heritage. Our American culture as a society of immigrants (albeit some forced to come in chains, and some rejected from entry) is nonetheless summed up in Emma Lazarus’ 1883 poem, “The New Colossus” which is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It speaks to an essential element at the heart of our American society:

“Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame

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With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,  
 'Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she  
 With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,  
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 1:27; Isaiah 43:1, 4.

<sup>v</sup> Romans 8:14-39. Also, Matthew 25:38, 40; Matthew 28:10 (Jesus calls his wayward disciples, "brothers"); Acts 9:17 (Ananias calls his enemy, "Brother"). That realization led former U.N. Assistant Secretary-General Robert Muller to state that "Therefore, every war is a civil war."

<sup>vi</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" April 16, 1963.

<sup>vii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Ibid.*; and Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 171, 181.

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Frank Griswold, "A Word to the Church" (New York: Episcopal News Service, July 11, 2006 - [http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577\\_76638\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76638_ENG_HTML.htm) ).

<sup>ix</sup> Radical welcome is not only crucial in our church and community life and in our national life, but is also crucial in our international life and as members of our global Anglican Communion as we continue to confront our ongoing issues that divide us while also holding these differences in tension and in a spaciousness of spirit. However this all plays itself out over time, I do agree with the observation of Njongonkulu Ndungane, former Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa who put it as follows:

"We must recognise as brothers and sisters in Christ those who call on Jesus as their Lord. We may think they are wrong on various issues, but that is different from doubting their sincerity, the validity of their faith or their membership in the body of Christ. As Paul tells the Corinthians, we know there is vast diversity within Christ's body – so vast it is likely to stretch our understanding of legitimate faith to the limit, just as seeing is incomprehensible to the ear, or hearing to the eye (cf 1 Corinthians 12:14ff). It is God alone who decides who is a member of Christ's body, among those who claim to follow him. We must wrestle with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, encouraging one another in pursuit of the truth; and if any of us are misguided in our sincerity, we too can trust Gamaliel's words to the Sanhedrin: 'If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow [it]' (Acts 5:38, 39)" (Njongonkulu Ndungane, "The Heartlands of Anglicanism" (Capetown, July 10, 2006)).