

There's something you should know: I'm not a big fan of evangelism. That may sound a bit odd coming from a priest. So, maybe a better way to say it is that I don't have much interest in the way evangelism often is done.

Sometimes, we hand out our own private opinions wrapped in some awkward version of "thus sayeth the Lord." And that insecurity chokes openings for life-giving relationships with disagreements. Sometimes, we emphasize spreading the Gospel at the expense of practicing it ourselves. The incongruity creates more confusion than conversion.

I don't say that to chastise anyone. I want to acknowledge these faux pas like Paul in his letter to the Romans, by "speaking in human terms because of our natural limitations." As marvelous as we are, we are all flawed creatures. We are all insecure and careless from time to time. I drove by a sign last week and thought, "Yeah, that's about right." The sign read: "Some days I amaze myself and some days I find my keys in the freezer."

Now, I love the church, but this describes her as well. We have our brilliant moments and our cringe-worthy moments, and smaller missteps in between. Like with this insight from Matthew's Jesus. We may, in our enthusiasm, have lost the plot a little.

What these two verses *really* offer is the antidote to inelegant evangelism. And yet, when we hear the word "welcome," (Matthew's Greek is actually "receive"), we leap rather quickly to hearing Jesus bidding us to be a welcoming church.

For the past couple of decades, the Episcopal Church has (maybe) over-privileged hospitality a bit. We *rightly* started using more inclusive language, built wheelchair ramps, and installed sound and hearing systems. All that is right and good. There is more to do and *there is* plenty of scriptural support for doing it.

It's just that if we hear Jesus in *this* passage saying, "Be welcoming," we will miss an essential teaching and some indispensable encouragement.

This is, after all, the conclusion to Matthew's "mission discourse." Jesus is talking to his followers – insiders. He is not teaching us how to behave when people come to us. He is teaching us how to behave when

we are going about our daily lives interacting with people who are not his followers – outsiders that God wants to invite inside.

This chapter of Matthew begins with Jesus gathering followers. Then he teaches them how to go out and disciple. In this closing passage, Jesus says something that he must *really* want us to understand because it echoes an earlier teaching that says: “As you enter a house, wish peace. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. If not, let your peace return to you.”

Jesus has warned this scraggly bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, hotheads and peasants that disciplining others will be dangerous. That they are likely going to be insulted and slandered; persecuted and rejected. And this concluding passage offers his followers all the encouragement they will ever need.

Bringing the realm of God’s heaven its fullness is not our human responsibility. It’s *God’s*. We are charged with learning and practicing what Jesus taught, and then interacting with people so that they encounter a spark of God’s light and love; the slightest taste of God’s mercy and justice.

Whether they receive us or not as emissaries of God’s compassion is entirely between them and God. When they *do* receive what we offer, they receive God. And God makes them whole, not us. God defeats their demons. God grants their reward.

We do not save others, God does. We do not transform others, God does. We do not offer the joy of God’s heaven, God does. Whether they receive the God’s gifts of grace or not is not up to us.

Now, that doesn’t let us off the hook. We are compelled to live out the teachings of Jesus as coherently as we can. And where we haven’t done so, we ask forgiveness. Our willingness to look as honestly as we can at ourselves is how we demonstrate our confidence in God’s presence.

We aren’t responsible for another person’s answer to God. That’s not a reason to disengage from life, culture and community. Because one of the rewards of learning and practicing our faith is an increasingly larger and more encompassing perspective. And *that* perspective creates an ever-more trusting calmness about God’s action in the world around us.

There is a 2,000-year-old Zen story that illustrates this kind of composure. It’s a story about a farmer and his horse, the most valuable thing that he owned. One day, the horse ran away. So, the farmer’s

neighbor came over to console him: "I'm so sorry about your horse!" The farmer answered, "Who can say if this is good or bad?"

The very next day, the horse returned, bringing with it a herd of wild horses. So, the neighbor returned to celebrate with the farmer:

"Congratulations on your great, good fortune!" Again, the farmer replied, "Who can say if this is good or bad?"

On the following morning, the farmer's son went out to start taming the wild horses. He got up on one horse that bucked and threw the boy to the ground, breaking his leg. Over comes the neighbor again. "I'm so sorry about your son." Are you already guessing what the farmer said? Yup. "Who can say if this is good or bad?"

Wouldn't you know – the very next day, a garrison of soldiers came through their village conscripting able-bodied young men to fight in a war. But they spared the farmer's son because of his broken leg.

Well, that story can go on and on. But what the neighbor is beginning to learn from the farmer is that the more we relax our grip on our definitions of success and failure, the less we get stuck on immediate outcomes and the more we can leave all outcomes to God.

Listen, there's nothing at all wrong with being a welcoming church. Do that. But remember, too, that God is the source of life and grace for all people. That may give us just enough courage to share the grace God has poured out in our lives, because that grace is not only for us, but for everyone.

God pours grace over us so that we can give voice to situations that are not how they are supposed to be. That's the prophetic sigh; the movement of the Holy Spirit stirring us to action. And when others hear that prophetic voice *naming* the situation, calling attention to the situation, rather than insisting on our opinion-biased solution, the recognition inspired in their own hearts is the prophet's reward.

God pours grace into our lives so that we can live them in integrity, in right relationship with each other, in right relationship with our teachings and tradition, in right relationship with God and with God's creation. None of us is wise enough *on our own* to be up to the task that Jesus has left his followers. But the church is a community supporting and challenging each other to do our best to live in right relationship. When people see the fruit of

those relationships, their impulse to move toward God's heavenly realm is the righteous person's reward.

They may even offer a cup of cold water in gratitude for the liberating experience of feeling fully alive. But then we don't seek to earn gratitude, do we? Besides, who can say if their response is good or bad? We give away the realm of heaven because it seeps and it spills out of us. We do it because that's how God made us: flawed vessels, *perfect* for giving heaven away.

There's no need for us to fix anyone else. There's no need for us to fear anyone else. There's no need to hide our opinions in pious disguises or hide behind what the church says or doesn't say. There's *really* no need to wave a bible at folks; that's like waving a cape in front of a bull, and it tends not to end well.

We need only to practice our faith and to live it joyfully; the most elegant method of evangelism.

Because there is no place large enough to contain God's joy, we shrug, we raise our hearts and hands, and it flows out of us into everything we touch. We are not responsible. We can take no credit, any more than the night sky can take credit for the moon, but simply holds it and shares it, and in that way, is known¹.

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¹ This is a paraphrased verse from Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, "So Much Happiness."

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