



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Whom Do We Welcome?

David Shinn and Evelyn Ngwa

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Matthew 10:40-42

Shinn: Evelyn Ngwa is one of our newly ordained Deacon from the class of 2019. In addition to her participation in our bible study and adult education, she is also a member of our newest congregational care ministry, the Prayer Companions. I am very delighted to have her sharing this time with us. Thank you for being here with us this morning.

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.” On Heritage Sunday, Tim, flanked by two of our Heritage members, began the sermon by reminding us how our storied faith is steeped in this beautiful tapestry of stories. In retelling the stories, it stirs the hearts and minds of the faithful to recall God’s incredible deliverance from bondage to liberation. This is the core of our spiritual DNA, that we are a people who believe that God migrated to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Who, under the tyrannical oppression of Herod, fled to Egypt and became a refugee. In fact, the story goes even further back. It begins with Adam and Eve, the world’s first immigrants. Our biblical stories are filled with stories of our faithful ancestors being called and sent to lands unknown such as Abraham, the wandering Aramean. Our spiritual stories are told through the lens of immigrants and refugees. Yet we have often forgotten the root of this meaning and practice.

In the same way, deep within our country's DNA, we are a nation of immigrants. On this July 4th weekend as our nation celebrates its 241th birthday, we remember how this land was first founded by the Native Americans who traversed through great distance from Asia to the Americas. Centuries later, a new wave of Europeans immigrants escaping from religious intolerance, settled and colonized this land. Since then, waves and waves of immigrants and refugees have come seeking for religious liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.

Sharing texts with Tim on Friday, Tim tells me about two nurses who came as immigrants and refugees. One person came at the age of three escaping from the atrocity of the Khmer Rouge. While the other came to the US by way of becoming a refugee in Ghana when her own country, Liberia, erupted in civil war.

This is who we are. A country made up of immigrants fleeing from tyrants, escaping poverty, and seeking for better life.

With 241 years of history of immigration, how are we doing today in welcoming immigrants and refugees?

In just a few words in our scripture today, mixed with power and compassion, Jesus challenges us to think deeply about the meaning of welcoming one another. In doing so, we may then discover and receive the reward that comes from the warm hospitality which is at the center of God's welcome and gift of faith to us. Our focus this morning is on hospitality and on compassionate welcome as a form of Christian discipleship and service on behalf of Christ to all people of God.

This hospitality and compassionate welcome are the simple and basic acts of kindness we can all perform in welcoming one another. We like to invite you to look around here in this community and look beyond this community in the way we can practice hospitality and compassionate welcome.

Ngwa: Looking at our passage from the gospel of Matthew; Jesus challenges his disciples to go against the status quo and implement God's alternative plan of "A just and merciful world" by continuing his mission on earth. He continues "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward" 10:42.

Jesus's mission on earth was and continues to be about bringing love to the world by:

Proclaiming the Good news, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead.

According to Jesus, mission is not optional but the very reason why the church and disciples exist. These disciples today are all who have chosen to follow Christ called Christians. Those people are you and me, and everyone is included.

Shinn: As we stand before you this morning, we like to share our personal stories of being welcomed as a stranger to this strange land. From the immigrant's point of view, United States is fascinatingly strange in so many ways.

When I first came to the US, my adopted parents wanted to help me learn as much as I could and as fast as I could, about this land. It was no coincidence that I began the formative years of my immigrant journey in the Commonwealth of Virginia. To help me, they asked one of their very good friends who also was a high school English teacher, Mrs. Barbara

King, to tutor me. For the initial months, every afternoon after school hours, Mrs. King came by for half an hour to sit with me and help me with homework. Her first assignment for me: memorize the names of the 50 states and the capitals. Thank God she didn't ask me to learn the state bird and state flower. Although I did learn the state bird of VA is the cardinal, and the state flower is the dogwood. Later I was told the state bird of MN is the mosquito.

Yet, I learned the most about hospitality and welcome on the Chuckatuck Creek and the tributary rivers of the James River, where the settlement from English arrived to build Jamestown. There, Mrs. King took me fishing at least couple times a week during my first summer in 1983. She packed sandwiches, fruits, and her favorite drink, Dr. Pepper, in the cooler. We hopped on her Johnson outboard motor boat and off we went to look for her crab traps and good fishing spots. At times, Mr. Jack King, a veteran of the Korean War and a Newport News shipyard builder for over three decades, would join us. To this day, I have a very soft spot for Mr. and Mrs. King's kindness.

Evelyn, what about your welcome experience?

Ngwa: I came into the United States through Newark International Airport. At the entrance was a greeter dressed in a red suit, black pants and a tie. He had this big smile on his face and shouted to everyone "Welcome! Welcome to the United States of America! Enjoy yourself; feel at home, you are welcome!"

I thought he was talking to me directly. It felt as if the greeter was talking to me personally because in a strange land that I know no one else other than those I was traveling with. How could a stranger be so welcoming? The image and message of the greeter stayed in my memory to date. It felt nice to be welcomed by a stranger in strange land.

Shinn: While we both have fond memories, there were also challenges. Evelyn would you like to tell us about your experience?

Ngwa: Well, we don't have snow in Cameroon. You all know that. I traveled in January, the heart of winter and snow. I knew about winter, and I read about it. I knew about the cold and I prepared for it. Yet I had not experienced winter or cold before then. No amount of warm clothing and no amount of heat could keep me warm, especially at night. I put on sweatpants, sweatshirts, socks hat, and mittens. There was central heat, and I also had a bedside heater. That didn't make any difference and I wanted to go back home so badly. To crown it all, I was separated from my family. My husband and I were here while our young children stayed back home for the time being until we stabilized. The cold was one part, but being apart from my family just made things worst. That was not a very good experience. My family means so much to me and I was separated from them.

Shinn: A significant part of the immigrant life reality is not just adjustment, learning, sacrifices, but also challenges of separation from one's family and familiar culture. While we both have many difficult challenges range from blatant in-your-face racism to subtle and demeaning micro-aggression, that's not the focus of the message here. The focus, however, is how do we put to use Jesus' teaching of hospitality and compassionate welcome in our daily lives?

In v. 42, Jesus says, "and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of the disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Notice Jesus says, "give even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones." In the arid climate of Nazareth or Capernaum, keeping anything cold would be nearly impossible. Yet, it is only possible if one is intentional and dedicated to either draw water from a very deep well or keep the

water deep inside the house to keep it cool. In other words, the prerequisites of practicing hospitality and compassionate welcome are intention and dedication.

Evelyn, I do believe you have couple suggestions for us to ponder and practice.

Ngwa: Do not be afraid of people who are different from us. Whether if they are young, old, female, male, tall or short. Let's not be afraid of people.

Example: Let's say an 80-year-old woman is sitting by a 13-year-old young man in church. The adult in this case who is a mature Christian can help the young man feel at home by showing interest in what they are doing. Oh what book are you reading, what is it about, what grade are you in, by the way, my name is Evelyn and what is yours? It seems you like to read, who are your parents etc. As much as you can keep this conversation going.

By doing so the adult has met the young man where he is and this might be an invitation from this adult to this young man to come to church for one more week. This is showing love to the younger teenager. A teenager can experience acceptance. This is doing church together.

Next, spend 1-2 minutes of your time to know your pew neighbor by talking and shaking hands, by finding out where people are from and what they are doing. Welcome people sitting by you or coming in through the doors of Westminster. Your neighbor might be a guest or first-time comer.

Once you connect with them, they will feel at home. They will not feel like a stranger.

Mission work is not optional and we are all Disciples of Christ to bring love to the world. Be each other's greeter with the bright red suit and big smile at the airport yelling WELCOME TO AMERICA.

Shinn: Thank you, Evelyn for this powerful and important reminder that we begin the practice and hospitality and welcome from right here in this community, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Our doors are wide open to them and we can share our welcome and our lives with them.

Yet we as a nation are struggling. We are struggling with hospitality and compassionate welcome when amped up fear-driven rhetoric toward immigrants, refugees, and people of Muslim faith. For many Asian Americans, the newly installment of the travel ban echoes perilously close to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 when Chinese immigrants were denied entry to maintain racial purity in the US. It also echoes dangerously to President Roosevelt's executive order 9066 when he ordered Americans of Japanese heritage into internment camps. Once again, the bell of fear, resentment, and anger tolls.

However, the bell of hospitality and compassionate welcome must toll louder and brighter. Christians, you are, WE are that bell. Our Westminster vision of Open Door Open Future is that very bell of hospitality and compassionate welcome. We are followers of Christ and we will not fail. We will not fail because in our nation's DNA, we are a country of immigrants that fled from tyranny for liberty, from oppression for freedom, and from injustice for humanity. In our Christian DNA, Jesus instills in us hospitality and compassionate welcome. Let us not forget our national DNA and our spiritual DNA. Sarah encouraged us not to hide our hope under a bushel last week. Let us shine that hope in our open and faithful expression of hospitality and compassionate welcome.

Whom do we welcome? Everyone! Everyone, we will. Amen.