

*Sermon*  
*June 28, 2020*  
*B. Nicol*

Our text today comes from the very end of what is known as the mission or missionary discourse – one of 5 large blocks of Jesus’ speech that all have similar endings “when Jesus finished these words...”

In the verses leading up to this point, Jesus prepares the disciples for their eventual sending with a list of warnings. He gives them authority to teach and preach the gospel, and to heal, but warns they must to travel light, not take any money or extra clothing, rely on others hospitality, only stay where they are welcomed, and if rejected, must just shake the dust off their feet and move on.

They are cautioned that in sharing Jesus’ mission, the disciples will also be treated like Jesus – often rejected, denounced, and even harmed because Jesus’ message will not be well received everywhere. It will even divide their families.

Matthew shows Jesus explaining that prophets and righteous people are welcomed because that’s who they are, and that even someone who gives them a cup of cold water is welcomed as a disciple. This is a welcome that recognizes and respects and values the identity of who people are – what we strive for today – to recognize and respect and value the identity of each person for who they are.

Here in Matthew, the little ones are not children, but the vulnerable ones – the disciples and other new believers. Offering cold water was the smallest courtesy one could offer and those who welcome the disciples will receive the reward of salvation. Ancient Jewish law held that a person’s messenger or representative was considered the same as, and treated the same as the person. Matthew’s audience also believed that welcoming anyone was like welcoming Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew was written – to a mostly Jewish Christian community – after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., when there was a lot of confusion and uncertainty about how the church would continue because they could no longer worship in the Temple.

The destruction of the temple took away their gathering place, raised questions about God and “forced a debate about how to live faithfully.”<sup>1</sup>

We are in a similar kind of situation. We can’t yet gather in our building to worship – and, we’re also like Jesus’ disciples - uncertain about how we’ll be received. Wondering if our neighbor will cross the street to have more distance when we’re out walking.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One-Volume Commentary*, Roberta Gaventa and David Petersen, eds., Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 1745.

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Wondering how long we'll experience the awkward avoidance of people in places we are able to go.

We've had to let go of a lot of the ways we used to do things – in our daily lives, in the church, in our world, and accept that things are not going to go back to being the way they were. Recent news reports tell us that as much as we want to be done with it, “The coronavirus isn't done with us yet.” It's not going to end soon, and more and more events and openings are getting pushed back – some indefinitely – so we need to find our *new normal*.

The new normal will probably include changes we've already made - phone banking, curbside pick up, video visits with the doctor, and online church.

We are still doing ministry and mission, but churches are finding a new normal, too. Tom Berlin, in an article for the Lewis center for Leadership, says now is the time “to consider a hybrid approach to ministry for at least another 18 months, if not forever.”<sup>2</sup> By hybrid, he means a combination of vital online ministry and limited, safe, in-person ministry that starts small. This means making a longtime commitment to online ministry and also that in-person ministry will probably begin long before in-person worship.

For now we can't welcome people in our usual ways. We need to learn new ways to welcome.

One of the important ways we can show hospitality is to take care of others by staying home, by following protocols when we do go places, and being considerate of the other person. Showing Jesus' love by keeping others safe.

Maybe you saw Jenna Jonaitis' article “Stand your ground on social distancing” reprinted from *The Washington Post* in last week's *Daily Herald*.<sup>3</sup> She wrote that things are difficult because our very lives depend on keeping that distancing. Even if we have to say no to friends.

Jonaitis notes that each of us is trying to figure out what to do every day. Is it safe to go? Where and when? With whom? All these decisions are made more difficult because each person has their own level of risk tolerance, and we need to respect those differences. This can cause strains in our relationships, even in our own households. Just thinking about making these negotiations can cause anxiety, sadness, anger, depression and more stress.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Berlin, in Leading Ideas from the Lewis Center for Leadership, June 10, 2020, *Committing to a Hybrid Model of Ministry*, <https://www.churchleadership.com/?s=Committing+to+a+hybrid+model+of+ministry>.

<sup>3</sup> Jenna Jonaitis, “How to stand your ground on social distancing, without alienating family and friends,” June 8, 2020, *The Washington Post*.

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Jonaitis says experts suggest we create and then communicate boundaries. Ask the other person about their boundaries or rules and then talk about them. We won't always agree. So...we need to get used to saying no even if we don't like to. Each person is entitled to

his or her own opinion, but we need to act in accordance with what is safe, and not feel bad if we want to wait before gathering.

**All** of this will need constant reviewing – it's not going to be once and done.

Jonaitis says we need to take advantage of all the other ways we can connect with people – and that we might feel better if we make some plans for some get together, trips or events that we can do sometime in the future.

For now, our welcoming won't be into our building – it's going to be in how we treat the people with whom we interact, focusing on what we CAN do safely now.

We can be friendly and welcoming to people in our online groups – maybe we could add more groups: bible studies, a knitting group, a recipe group, or just a group to get together and talk.

We can check on each other by phone

We can do video calls and see each other.

We can send people cards and letters and email

We can even play chess or checkers or board games on Zoom! Try it!

We can pray with and for each other.

And we can also take a moment to give God thanks for the good things that have happened.

This week I asked about being welcoming on our Facebook page– one person said they'd found it difficult to converse because you can't see facial expressions or reactions with masks – but that it was satisfying to talk anyway.

Another contributor said that her mom had come over for lunch – they ate outside and when it was time for the grandmother to leave, her 7-year old grandson spontaneously said “it was nice to have you here.” That kind of says it all. What wonderful welcome that young boy gave – to let his grandma know how much he appreciated just being with her *in a new a different way*.

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Be safe.

Keep in touch in ways we can.

Continue to share God's love.

Amen.