

Year A, Proper 8 2026
St Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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One of the great joys of worship at this time of year comes in meeting the summer residents, vacationers, science interns and other researchers who flock to Falmouth and Woods Hole at this time of year

Each brings fresh energy and human complexity that mixes between the intensities of research and the yearnings for a beautiful day at the beach

Of course, I mean no disrespect to our year-round parishioners who provide our continuity, heartiness in the blustery days of winter, along with their own fair share of blessing and complexity

But now, we get the best of both worlds, even as we learn new names or renew old connections

So let's hear it for welcoming young and old, newcomers and old-timers, year-rounders and seasonal parishioners in our midst

So how does my sudden exuberance sync up with perhaps the briefest Gospel passage of the year, a mere three verses from Matthew?

In MT's gospel today, Jesus invokes the word 'welcome' six times in three verses, so do you suppose he wants us to ponder the word?

Is Jesus belaboring the obvious—welcome the stranger—or does his admonition unlock a key ingredient to the Christian way of life?

Except for the most extremely reclusive loners, each of us yearns to be recognized, to be welcomed into new bonds of community, and to have at least part of our human story known to others

All of us have painful stories about when this goal has fallen far short

Whatever our unique of human backstory, blessing and neurosis, we want to be known by name, accepted for who we are, and welcomed into the deeper fabric of community that we attempt to embody each week at Saint Barnabas Church

In lifting up this vision, our Gospel writer Matthew does not so much create three verses of Scripture as he knits together three separate sayings of Jesus into a single thread of hospitality and vision for God's Kingdom on earth

We find parallel sayings in MK, LK and JN, but MT seems to go out of his way to connect Jesus's teaching with hospitality

These passages come at end of the so-called missionary discourses to his disciples, where Jesus talks to the disciples about what they are to do and the difficulties that they will face

Now Jesus focuses on who will—or won't—welcome the disciples and what God will do with them

For Jesus, welcoming shows hospitality to the stranger in more than a 1:1 encounter between two people

Remember that in Jesus' day, there was no such thing as raw individualism, because everyone was deeply embedded in kinship and tribal connections, so intense group identity and cohesion was presumed in every 1:1 encounter

Since its earliest days, Christian community added a critical additional layer to this web of relationship

At least as far back as St Benedict in the 5th century, Christians were called to welcome the stranger as if they were welcoming Christ himself

Talk about a high bar of hospitality and trust!

Imagine serving as usher next Sunday and welcoming each arriving worshiper as if you were welcoming Christ into our midst

On September 11, 2001, I was interim rector of Grace Church in NYC, about a mile north of the World Trade Center

I was attending an early-morning property committee meeting when the low roar of jet engines disrupted our conversation, making me an ear witness to that day of infamy

We all know what happened next

The fallen towers also took out all the cell phone towers, so parishioners had to scramble to find loved ones amid the chaos, many showing up at the church as the place to go when all hell breaks loose

After reconnoitering with family and with no play book to consult, the crowd of some 30 parishioners immediately sprang into action

They commandeered hundreds of paper cups from the parish school refectory, hooked up a garden hose in front of the church on Broadway—which became the main migration path out of hell—and offered cold water to strangers who were in obvious clinical shock with no preconditions whatsoever

We live out the same witness every week in our Place at the Table ministry we welcome each guest as we would Christ himself, offering community, hot food, music and respite with no questions asked

Today's passage in which Jesus calls on us to give cold water to the stranger should occur whether we confront one person in distress or thousands from a mass casualty event

So we welcome stranger or loved one as we would welcome Christ himself

Every month or two, I hear about a survey regarding churchmanship in America and why some people choose not to affiliate with organized religion

Like clockwork, you read about how they are spiritual but not religious—whatever that means—or that they can connect with God on the golf course or the beach at sunset—beautiful

Inevitably, we then hear something about how church folks are just a bunch of hypocrites anyway

When I hear this, I want to scream out: "Of course. It takes one to know one. We're all back-stabbing, two-faced hypocrites and deceivers more than we would ever want to admit. Join the crowd.

That is exactly why there *is* a church - to give all of us hypocrites a place to go! The church is not some earthly antechamber where a contingent of miraculously saintly people gather as we wait to be ushered directly into a lofty place in heaven.

All have sinned. All have fallen short and all know that we are caught.

Since its earliest days, Christianity at its best has seen itself as a hospital for sinners, not an exclusive club for saints

Those who complain about the kind of company they would have to keep if they came to church are simply demonstrating how well they would fit in!

If we were a notch more clever, we could put up a sign in front of the church saying, “Hypocrites gather on Sundays at 8:00 and 10:00!”

Welcome the stranger, and see the face of Christ in his or her eyes

See that person as created in the image of God and dwelling in inexhaustible mystery

Love the stranger—even the enemy, as Jesus challenges us elsewhere—not because you get a reward, but because God sets the pace in loving you first

Assume the stranger has a textured backstory—who doesn’t—but welcome him or her as if Christ himself

Love becomes joyfully contagious, freely flowing first from God, then through our hearts, and then back into the larger world as we keep passing it on

Such is the ethos that Jesus passes on to his disciples, to you and me today

Although as Americans, we never claim any unique part of the action, such radical love and trust of the other lies at the heart of democracy and our national experiment that we celebrate in this coming 250th Independence Day extended weekend

As a child of God, as an American, as one who is blessed with abundance and resources, give thanks for our common identity amid all our foibles, that we connect the generous love of God to the perfecting of a great nation into which we have been born or adopted

In the coming days of our 250th celebration, let's cheer on our nation while pointing to our higher angels instead of our darker demons

As individuals, as a parish family and as a nation dedicated to the greater good, let's continue to give a cup of cold water to those in need even as we give thanks for bounty bestowed upon us

As we give thanks for those parishioners who recently completed the intensive Sacred Ground curriculum, let's reaffirm America's spirit of love that does not rest until every man, woman, and child of every race and ethnic background can pursue the American Dream unimpaired by racism, class prejudice, or other cultural barriers

In the words of that old spiritual, I hope you enjoy an extended holiday week ahead, click your heals once or twice, enjoy a great barbecue, awesome fireworks, and hum that simple tune more than once:

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine;
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine;
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine;
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.