

TEXT: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42  
THEME: Whoever welcomes you welcomes me  
SUBJECT: Hospitality  
TITLE: Where God Happens

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Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” So, whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes God. Since we welcome Jesus by welcoming one another, by welcoming one another we also welcome God!

Anthony the Great (c250-356), the earliest and most influential of the Christian desert monastic teachers wrote: *Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.*

St Anthony believes winning the brother or sister and winning God are linked. Winning them does not mean persuading them of our point of view or convincing them to join our team. We “win” them by opening doors for them to healing and wholeness. Insofar as we open our hearts and lives to another, insofar as we offer hospitality to another, we gain God, we become a place where God happens. *You become a place where God happens!*

Rowan Williams explains how this works. To find my own life is a task I cannot undertake without the neighbor; life itself is what I find in solidarity. The real criteria for a properly functioning common life is life-giving connection with one another. This connection makes possible the reality of reconciliation or wholeness. Welcoming the other is the means of discovering a way to truth and life.

We welcome Jesus by welcoming flesh and blood human beings who come to us as brothers and sisters, as neighbors, and as Matthew’s image of the last judgment (Matthew 25) makes clear, as the naked, the hungry, the prisoner, the sick, the harassed and helpless, the least of these. For Matthew the spiritual life is not sentimental, not pious, but the practice of hospitality, the opening of our hearts and homes to the other.

Anna María Pineda, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University, tells us that one New Testament word incorporates a profound truth. *Xenos* in Greek means “stranger” and “guest” and “host.” This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another.

A common English word uses the same root: *xenophobia*, fear of the stranger, which is often associated with extreme nationalism or intense “my group is better than your group” attitudes. Turn this word around and make a little change, however, and you get the New Testament word for hospitality: *philoxenia*, a love of the guest or stranger.

*Philoxenia* can also mean love of the whole atmosphere of hospitality and the whole activity of guesting and hosting. Indeed, within a *philoxenic* circle of mutuality, unexpected transformations occur. This happens again and again when Jesus eats with others. He arrives at a wedding as a guest, but when the wine runs out, he provides more and becomes the host.

The circle of mutual hospitality embraces and transforms the people who enter it. When it is most fully realized, hospitality not only welcomes strangers, it also recognizes their holiness. It sees in the stranger a person dear to and made in the image of God, someone bearing distinctive gifts that only he or she can bring.

As challenging as welcoming the stranger is, welcoming the prophet, as Jesus instructs us to do, is more challenging. Prophets are not interested in being liked, in being polite guests. Prophets challenge our self-interests, our sources of power, our economic privileges, our security. Prophets refuse to accept that the way things are are the way things must be, that the way things have always been are the way they must always be.

Prophets like Jeremiah are not easy to welcome. The reading from Jeremiah drops us into the middle of a prophet's quarrel. Hananiah, a slick young prophet, rising in favor with the court, shares an encouraging message. The exile will soon come to an end; the temple and monarchy will be restored. His hearers feel good.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, baffles his listeners. He preaches desolation in joyful times and real estate development in the middle of a war. He is prone to episodes of doubt and despair. He pioneers performance art: just prior to this passage, he dons a yoke of straps and bars to symbolize the captivity of Judah in Babylon.

When Hananiah promises that Judah's time in bondage is soon coming to an end, Jeremiah is dubious. "Amen!" he replies sarcastically. "May the Lord do this." But what's more likely, he adds, is a future in line with the prophets of old, those who preached war, pestilence, and famine. The real world is hard, Jeremiah says, and no amount of smooth preaching can make it less so.

Hananiah, enraged, breaks Jeremiah's yoke from his neck. It takes Jeremiah a little while to come up with the right retort, but when he does it is chilling: not only does he replace his broken wooden yoke with a brand-new iron one, but he announces that the Lord will strike down Hananiah, because he "**made this people trust a lie.**" Within the year, the false prophet dies.

Welcome a prophet as a prophet, Jesus tells us. Jesus knows that welcoming a prophet is not as simple as marking the sanctuary entrance clearly from the parking lot. Instead, we will need to recognize the holy in odd behavior and provocative symbolic fashion choices. We'll need to accept what is right, instead of settling for what is easy or convenient.

Clarence Jordan published the *Cotton Patch Version* of the New Testament in the 1950's and 1960's. During this period, he also got involved in the work of racial reconciliation in Georgia.

This work was not popular. Tension between blacks and whites was high. Marchers paraded down city streets. Police used dogs and fire hoses to disperse little ones.

Soon Clarence's work came under fire. He turned to his brother Robert for legal help. His brother was a prominent Georgia lawyer and politician. Clarence was shocked by his brother's refusal to help. Clarence immediately confronted his brother about his commitment to Jesus. Robert defended himself, saying: "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point . . ." Clarence looked at his brother and said, "Robert, you are not a follower of Jesus, you are an admirer of his."

It is easier to welcome the Jesus who comes to us in the singing of "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," than it is to welcome the Jesus who comes to us in the thundering demands for justice. This kind of hospitality is a hard and holy challenge. But if we heed this calling, Jesus promises, we will receive a prophet's reward: a glimpse of what is real in an era of falsehood.

A prophet's reward is liberation from the constraints of delusional or magical thinking, the freedom to embrace reality and truth and life. A prophet's reward is a relentless hope that refuses to accept intractable patterns of exploitation and oppression. A prophet's reward is the hospitality of God, of becoming the place where God happens.

PRAYER: St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a mystic who tended the sick and served the poor. Translation by Scott Cairns.

A soul rises up, restless  
with shuddering desire for God  
and desire for the salvation of souls.

For some while now, she has given  
herself to the arduous pursuit  
of virtue, and has become

accustomed to dwelling  
in the vertiginous cell  
of self-knowledge, desiring

still better to know God's  
nearness, having seen  
how love is borne

upon knowledge. Thus,  
loving, she will pursue Truth,  
and drape herself in His beauty.