

**Riverside United Church**  
**July 28, 2024**

Offered by - Jeannie Taylor

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 10:40-42

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.  
41Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever  
welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;  
42and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell  
you, none of these will lose their reward."

**Reflection:** "Welcoming the Stranger"

There was a buzz in the congregation as they were anticipating the arrival of the new pastor. A good turnout to be sure, and a feeling of excitement in the sanctuary.

Several of the congregants had walked past the homeless person on the lawn outside, but nobody had stopped to give him money. He was unshaven and his clothes were torn. The ushers were taken aback when he came into the sanctuary and started walking towards a pew at the front of the church. They suggested he might prefer to sit near the back, so he complied.

There were the usual words of welcome and announcements, then the Chair of Ministry and Personnel went to the lectern to address the congregation and introduce the new pastor, Rev. McIsencraft. The congregation started clapping and cranking their necks to see the pastor coming down the aisle. To their surprise it was the person who they thought was homeless who was coming to the front of the church. When he came to the lectern all eyes were on him in disbelief. He began to read the scripture:

"For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. 37Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brothers,[a] you did it to me.'

After he recited this, he told them what he had experienced that morning, and they felt sad and ashamed.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, he said, should be more than just talk. It ought to be a lifestyle that others around you can love about you and share in. This means welcoming all the strangers we meet, including people from different ethnic groups, religions and lifestyles.

The value of being welcoming is deeply imbedded in many religions.

The ancient Celtic tradition included an obligation to provide hospitality to strangers or to foreigners, and it was codified in the customary law of early Irish and Welsh societies.

People fleeing their homeland is nothing new? it's been a part of the human story since long before our modern understanding of countries. For we Christians, we can look back to our Hebrew ancestors fleeing slavery in Egypt, an event that shaped their faith and the way they have always been told to interact with the world.

In the Torah, we find instructions like this found in Leviticus 19:34: The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (NIV)

It's a bit like the Golden Rule, which can be found in some form in all the major religions. In Islam it is expressed as: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourselves. In the Torah it says: What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. And of course, in Christianity we say: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The Hebrew people were foreigners; they fled slavery wandering the world in search of a new home. God told them to never forget that experience and treat other migrants accordingly.

There are countless passages like this all throughout the Bible; the command to offer hospitality to strangers, to care for foreigners, such as Paul, who told the early church to "be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."

And Jesus, who started his life as a refugee fleeing political persecution at the hand of Herod, talking about those who welcome strangers welcoming Jesus himself. Yes, the Bible is complex and there are many topics that need to be addressed with nuance, but this is not one of those? the evidence is overwhelming. Offering support to the stranger, whether they are homeless, immigrants, or refugees, is central to who we are as Christians.

It is very disturbing to hear about the increase in hate speech in Canada and other countries, and we are called to drown out those voices with words of love and compassion and acts of kindness.

As you know, the church has been active in refugee sponsorship since 1979, when the boat people arrived from Vietnam, resulting in the development of Canada's private sponsorship system. Since then, many churches have sponsored individuals and families from war-torn countries.

As Norm and Pat McLeod can tell you, getting through the paperwork and red tape is a huge hurdle and can take years, and we are very grateful for their work which has helped several people get a fresh start in Canada. But getting them here is only half the challenge. On arrival, many newcomers experience discrimination in finding accommodation and employment. They often experience obstacles such as accessing English classes, childcare and healthcare.

Even if we as individuals don't have the money to help support a refugee, or the means to help them find a home or drive them around to services, we can extend a welcome to newcomers with a warm smile, a cheerful phone call and by sharing food.

The scripture passage that Wanda read mentions the word "reward" three times. We will be rewarded when we show hospitality to all God's children, by learning about other cultures, the relationships we cultivate and the gifts that we share.

All through the gospels, Jesus talks about the coming age, the realm of God when all people will recognize that we are all kin. I don't believe that Jesus would recognize international borders or nationalities because we are one people under one God, all citizens of God's kin-dom. Therefore, in showing hospitality to strangers, we are not only helping to create God's realm. We are simply fulfilling what Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God," (ESV).

May it be so.

*Let us pause for a few moments of silent reflection, followed by a short prayer.*

Holy One. May those without shelter be under your guarding this day.

May the wandering find places of welcome.

And may we know that when we share your love and hospitality, we become Christ to one another.

Amen