For Reflection: *I had crossed the line. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land.* Harriet Tubman

**Hebrew Scripture**: Leviticus 19:34; Exodus 23:9

*In Hebrew Scripture there are over 90 references to how people of faith should treat aliens, those from another place who come to live among us, even for a short period of time. Listen for that guidance in our two short readings from the Old Testament.*

**Leviticus 19:34**

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord, your God.

*A variation on the same theme.*

**Exodus 23:9**

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

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

*Today’s reading from the gospel of Matthew is the lectionary’s recommended text for this morning. These are the final verses of Jesus’ long discourse to the disciples: he begins by granting them authority to preach and heal then follows with lengthy instruction on what they should take, what they can expect and warnings about the risks of following him. If what immediately precedes this might be referred to as the costs of discipleship, our few verses for today refer to its potential rewards. Let us listen together for God’s word.*

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever 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; and whoever gives even a cold cup of water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

**Sermon: Strangers in a Strange Land**

I confess to being upset when this text showed up in the lectionary—upset enough that I searched for another text, another sermon, another topic and outlined another order of worship—anything so that I did not have to address directly one of the many crises facing our country, indeed our world in these days. But, on this holiday, I try to address a topic reflecting our citizenship in this nation—a subordinate citizenship to our role as citizens in the reign of God. I decided that avoidance would be an act of cowardice, and after all, the lectionary was at least identifying a place to start. After all my evasions, I spent a lot of time reflecting on this text. This is what I heard.

Welcome. *Welcome. Welcome. WELCOME. Welcome! WELCOME.* The word appeared six times in our gospel text, so it must be important. And the text links us to a rare occurrence in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus doesn’t offer contemporary forms of encouragement for being a disciple. He promises no college scholarships; offers no angelic frequent flier miles; provides no pension for early retirement; and doesn’t bundle grace packages for
discount deeds of mercy. No. Mostly, his pep talks, if we can call them that, are filled with the reality of risk and challenge, highlighted by the prospects of disappointment and discouragement for those who choose to follow him, along with instructions for what to take and what to leave behind.

Finally comes this meager carrot of promised reward, and it all seems to hinge on how well we welcome. To begin to shape our welcome to others, let’s do as the Hebrew Scriptures suggest and remember what it is like to be a stranger ourselves.

It’s been a while since I’ve moved to a new place or entered a room where I didn’t know more people than fewer. But I’ll tell you—right now I feel like a stranger in a strange land. The strange land is this one—the land of my birth and my citizenship, but a nation and its people behaving in ways I have never imagined and grieve to see. I never thought this nation was perfect, but I think that we try. Yet the news, when we can bear to look at it, is filled with boundaries crossed—boundaries of taste, judgement, honesty, human regard, honor, trust, civil discourse and violence. Boundaries crossed all too often by people on every side of every debate, who if they ever recognize what they did wrong, they do so only because of backlash—provided the backlash is from those who they perceive to be "on the right side of the argument" to begin with. Otherwise, feedback seems to provide encouragement for even bolder assaults on the civil contract. A comedian holds up the decapitated head of the president as a joke. It's offensive, not funny and it's an outdated response to old news. A president regularly tweets offensive remarks about anyone who strikes his fancy or raises the needle on his offense meter. After a shooting at a Republican Senate baseball practice, some people were heard to say, "Perhaps now they will change their minds about gun control." A journalist who effectively challenged the status quo in media and in politics decided to interview someone who declared that the massacre at Sandy Hook was a hoax—apparently for anticipated ratings. Recent surveys show that more than half of Democrats and more than half of Republicans think the other party is putting the future of the nation at risk. No wonder we can't welcome refugees who may or may not look like us, who may or may not worship like us—we can barely tolerate one another. (This is not a commentary on immigration policy or practices, which is a discussion and education more appropriately held in another more participant-focused setting. It is commentary on the violence and discrimination with which people are being treated, especially, but not solely, if they are refugees.) I find myself in a land I whose language and customs I no longer grasp—a stranger in a strange land. Nor do I think I am alone—people on every side of the cultural, economic, social and political divide are wondering how we got where we are and what to do about it.

Let's be clear. No one comes to the table or leaves the table with clean hands. We no longer have the liberty of assuming or pretending some of us are innocent—bystanders or not. If we revile, denigrate or dismiss as not intelligent, other human beings for what they believe or how they vote; if we gather ourselves only with the like-minded; if we spend our time trying to rank the vileness of offenses rather than ruling them all out of bounds; if we condone, even with silence, violence against other human beings, we are contributing to the national divide.

... Now, it is not my understanding that Jesus had a great deal of concern about the rise and fall of particular nations, but he did have concern about how nations and their citizens conducted themselves. In some ways, we will always be strangers in the strange land between our citizenship in the reign of God and of any nation. But to be strangers within either one is more problematic. It may be, however, that our discipleship and our citizenship will be strengthened by revisiting the attitudes of welcome that scripture demands.

A great hint for us about how to express this gratitude comes to us from the ground of our word, "Welcome"—a compound of two Old English words meaning “desired” and “guest.” To provide a welcome is not simply to name someone a stranger; not simply to give floor space to an outsider; to offer a kind word; to draw a map. It is to somehow create within the stranger him or herself, an awareness that we will not take advantage of their vulnerability; that their very otherness is to us full of gift and possibility. It is to say to our fellow Christians, to our fellow citizens and to the sojourners among us, "We will not hurt you and we will not allow you to be hurt. We, ourselves, will not use hurtful words or violent actions. We will not dismiss your concerns. We will listen and learn from you. We will not make excuses for the behaviors of those we mostly agree with." That's a welcome that matters, not a mat to be trod upon. To create such a welcome is an act that has the capacity to create joy and hope for both the one who is welcomed and the one who welcomes.

We can do it. We do it. We do it all the time with children—welcoming them as Jesus called us to do and
as we are good at. Psychologist Michael Thompson writing about adoption said: “...You cannot be passive at these times... You have to reach out. You have to take the risk... [it is an] “an open-ended, full-hearted, go-for-broke commitment. Total and unconditional. It has no exit strategy.”

No exit strategy. Welcoming should not have an exit strategy either. It is creating a safe space where people might reveal who they are and where we also are revealed. It is entering into a relationship without planning how we are going to get out if it doesn’t go our way or we don’t get immediate gratification. Such welcoming is hard work, but has ultimate value. We can do it. We do it—in chosen relationships.

We need to choose those relationships more widely. To welcome without an exit strategy—to welcome adults, strangers, people we disagree with, or are different from us different from welcoming a child. It is a risky business. We are not in control. We can be disappointed. We can be hurt. We can and will be changed ourselves. There is no response that acknowledges another’s vulnerability without making ourselves vulnerable. As people of faith, however, it is obligatory for us to offer such a welcome in ever-widening circles.

Yet, if hospitality is to be hard-wired into our beings, we’ve got to practice it at home, in school, in the workplace, in the community and in the neighborhood, every day, all year long. Let us begin by, as a matter of faith and an act of discipleship, listening to those we know we disagree with; by speaking up in the face of violence or exclusion; by reading and listening critically to those with whom we agree; by condemning acts of hatred, inappropriate behavior and spirit-crushing language; and by not responding in-kind when we encounter such things. Bullying is bullying whether it happens in middle school, on the streets, or in any organization, including governments and churches. It is, in many ways, the polar opposite of offering welcome.

Our Scripture calls us to remind ourselves daily that "Welcome" is not simply a nice word. To welcome is an active, not passive thing. It is the hard work of discipleship that Jesus demands we do. Jesus said that if we welcomed him, if we welcomed the prophets, if we welcomed the righteous, if we welcomed the poor and vulnerable, we would receive a reward. He didn’t say what it would be and we don’t know.

Jesus suggests that offering hospitality is an act which ripples to heaven and back making impact in ways we can only, or perhaps not even, imagine. I suspect if we surrender our imaginations to the imagination of God, as hospitality becomes more and more deeply ingrained in us, as it becomes our whole way of life, we shall discover that the reward, the kingdom of God and the life abundant are among us even now—and can be again even more so in the future. May it be so.

**Invitation to the Lord’s Table**

Christine Pohl writes: “A life of hospitality begins in worship, with a recognition of God’s grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and a responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude to God’s love and welcome to us.” We come to the Table this day welcomed by God in Christ, who calls us feeds us and sends us. With gratitude, let us come and be welcomed that we might go forth a more welcoming people.