

**The Welcome Mat**  
(Matt 10:40-42; Gen 22: 1-14)

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There are a couple of very different themes in today's readings. And the one I'd like to focus on is hospitality, which really stands out in the Gospel reading and is appropriate for our upcoming Independence Day.

Today's Gospel reading comes from the end of a speech Jesus gave to his disciples before sending them out into the surrounding countryside to cast out unclean spirits and heal the afflicted in his name.

He told them to travel light and to expect no financial reward. He has warned that they will run into "wolves" and division and he counsels them to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And he ends his advice to them with the two verses that make up this morning's Gospel reading.

What stands out in these two verses is his use of the word "welcome." Jesus uses this word 6 times in these two verses alone. I think I can actually repeat the whole reading, without

taking too much time. And you can hear the repetition of this 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 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."

In Seminary Bible class, one of the things you are taught is to notice when words are repeated, because that will be a good key to understanding what is being said. And here the word "welcome" is all over the place. Jesus is making it crystal clear that hospitality is key!

Jesus is pointing to a "location", a "space", a "moment of opportunity", a "situation", in which his disciples are to do his work. It is a place where his blessing will be present and their efforts will be rewarded.

It seems to me that we can think of that place as being sort of like the front door, where we place our welcome mats; the doorstep

where a guest and a host encounter each other. You could say that, with these two verses, Jesus is holding out a “welcome mat” in front of his disciples and telling them, “See this? Anywhere you can throw down one of these, is where I will be with you to make good things happen. So, whenever you run into a stranger, consider that you are standing on a welcome mat and behave accordingly.”

Imagine walking around carrying a mat that says “welcome” on it and throwing it down at your feet whenever you run into another person, especially a stranger; then saying to yourself; “Now, behave accordingly!”

And the appropriate action, when we are standing in our doorway with the Welcome Mat at our feet is to offer hospitality to the other person; invite them in or offer that person a cup of cold water or some other kind of comfort or relief.

It’s important to understand that the hospitality that Jesus is talking about here is not only the hospitality we can offer others when they come to our doors. Here Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world and so here he is talking about what they should look for as visitor knocking at someone else’s door.

It seems to me that, whether we are at another person's door or the other person is at our door, is not what matters most. What matters most is that both sides take a hospitable approach to each other. And when that happens, the space where good things can happen has been created and God has the opportunity to extend a blessing.

When we were in Mexico these past weeks, we had many opportunities to enjoy the hospitality of the Mexican people. Of course there is never a place where everyone is happy to see you, but our experience was overwhelmingly positive. The people we met were kind and gracious to us, the food was incredible. My Spanish was terrible, and Sheryl's was great. And we came away feeling inspired by the genuine kindness of the people we met.

The Yucatan, where we were, has a reputation for being one of the friendliest places in Mexico and every day on the way to our Spanish lessons, strangers greeted us as we passed them on the street. If I were a citizen of the Yucatan, I would be very proud of this strong tradition of showing hospitality to visitors.

And on this Independence Day Weekend, I am reminded that, hospitality is also one of our own core values. And it is, to my mind, one of the main reasons why we should be proud of our country.

The Statue of Liberty is the equivalent to a “welcome mat,” recognized around the world as a symbol for our nation. Millions passed by it on the way to Ellis Island, the doorway to a life of greater opportunity here in this country.

But I think it is also true that in recent years a lot of fear and uncertainty has crept into the way people have been treated at our door. There is a fear that foreigners will take away jobs and destroy the common culture that binds us together. And it is true that when strangers become a part of the household, there are risks and things will change.

The Mexicans are experiencing this as well, as retirees and digital nomads loaded with dollars are increasingly going there from here and driving up prices in the more choice locations. And there is naturally some resentment over this influx, just as there is resentment here.

It seems to me that this lack of hospitality makes no sense. The Mexican economy needs our money and we could actually use more immigrants, because Social Security is going to crash unless we have enough young people to support our aging population.

You may be wondering whether the Old Testament reading for today could possibly have anything to say to all of this. As I understand it, it does.

When God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son, he was essentially telling him to put all his hopes for the future of his family on the chopping block. He had a choice to make. Either do as God asked and live with the consequences, or walk away from God and abandon the covenant. Abraham decided to stay with God and, thankfully, God provided a ram as a substitute at the last moment.

I think that this story does apply to the immigration situation we are in today, to the people standing at our doorstep. It is no doubt a complicated mess made more complicated by the fact that it is being used as a political football.

But extending hospitality to people from other lands, especially those fleeing from oppression or looking for a better life, is a core value in this country. Especially for those of us who profess to be Christians, it comes as a Commandment from God. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and neighbor, as we learn in the story of the Good Samaritan story, unquestionably includes foreigners.

It can be reasonably argued, as many are, that welcoming the immigrant today is something we should stop doing, because it is too risky; that it will take our future from us. But I don’t think that is an option for us as people of faith. As the story of the sacrifice of Isaac shows, God wants our obedience, even when it appears to be directly opposed to our own self-interest.

I would argue that, when we put this story together with the Gospel reading, God is saying, “I expect you to show hospitality to strangers and welcome them in, whether you think it is good for you and for your future or not.”

When you think about it, it has to be this way. Remaining steadfast in serving God’s will, even when it goes against our own

personal self-interest and our stake in the future, is what separates smallness and selfishness from greatness.

The purest act of devotion to the love of God is the one in which the cup of water is given without no expectation of advantage or a return on the investment. It is the willingness to do what God expects of us even at the risk of great personal loss. Abraham is expected to let go, even of his most cherished hopes for his son and for the continuity of the family line through Sarah.

So, personally I don't think this story is really about child sacrifice. I think it is a story that uses an extreme example to make us think about what it means serve God with a pure devotion, that has no thought of future gain. Concealed in this story is the message of the cross.

### **Our Country**

I will confess that, as we were on the long journey back on Friday, I was thinking about our wonderful experience in Mexico and about the immigration fiasco at our own doorstep and to be honest, the comparison made me feel unhappy. I wondered how I would end this 4<sup>th</sup> of July sermon on a positive note.

The answer was provided for me by the first person we spoke to as we entered customs in Atlanta and then again by the servers at the airport restaurant. The customs officer smiled at us and his first word was, “Welcome to the United States.” Inside my heart was kindled a small burst of joy, that kept burning as the servers at the restaurant laughed and joked with us, while we ate our meal.

The magnificent truth hit me! Regardless of the political and social dysfunction that many pundits point to and that we worry over, there are still millions and millions of ordinary Americans walking around carrying their welcome mats and steadfastly practicing millions of acts of hospitality.

These millions of our fellow citizens are ready at a moment’s notice to throw their welcome mat down on the floor and open their arms and show whoever happens to be standing in front of them, that they are glad you are here and to make you feel at home and loved.

Despite the pandemic. Despite the constant spotlight on everything that is dysfunctional. Despite all the ups and downs, they are here, carrying forward the legacy and vision of America

at its best, whether they are rewarded for it or not. And that is a devotion worth celebrating.