

Text: Matthew 10:40-42  
Title: Welcoming Jesus  
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON  
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## **If you were all that someone knew about what it means to be follower of Jesus, what would they think of Jesus?**

There's that famous quip attributed to Gandhi about Christians:

"I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

It's one of those oft-quoted quotes that's hard to track down if it's true or not. But this quote has gained a lot traction by Christians especially because, well, we know that we fail at looking like Jesus. A lot.

And I come across this quote most frequently when a certain segment of the Christian family is pointing fingers at another segment of the Christian family.

I was even quick to do this myself this morning. I got caught up in pointing fingers at the guy in downtown Kitchener at the Speakers' Corner, a public space at the corner of Frederick and King, who was literally standing on a box with a portable speaker and microphone preaching hellfire and brimstone and damnation to anyone who would listen. I love Jesus but I wanted nothing to do with the version of Jesus he was spewing. And so it's really easy to take a swipe at the guy on the street corner. Don't worry, Gandhi, we're not all like that!

But this sermon got tougher and this portion of Scripture got harder, when I turned my attention to my own life. I might not be yelling hatred in downtown Kitchener, but what do others see of Jesus when they look at me?

## **If you were all that someone knew about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, what would they think of Jesus?**

A couple of weeks ago, we spent time with Jesus and his disciples as Jesus was sending them out. He looked on the people around him with compassion. Moved by their vulnerability. By their brokenness. By their need for healing and life. And he sent out his disciples into all the towns and villages to preach and to heal and to point people to the coming Kingdom of God. And here this

morning we are at the end of Jesus' instructions to the Twelve. His instructions include some harsh words and teachings about the reality they would face - persecution, hatred, resistance, division - and he describes their situation as being "sheep among wolves" but telling them not to arm themselves with, well, with anything. No money. No extra clothes. Not a bag lunch. Nothing.

Basically Jesus tells his disciples:

You are at the mercy of those who welcome you and those who don't.

And then we come to our portion of Jesus' words for us this morning:

Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

Now we're quite familiar with and heard many good sermons about how we're supposed to welcome in the stranger. Welcome in the outsider. Welcome in others. And we get that more or less. Show hospitality. And it puts the ball in our court. We're the ones doing the welcoming. Pretty simple. Go, and be more welcoming.

But that's not what Jesus is saying here.

There's an ancient law according to which a man's authorized and designated messenger is in fact the man himself. For all intent and purposes, the messenger is the one who sent him. Jesus is here applying that ancient law to his disciples. When they are welcomed, he is welcomed too.

Matthew gives us Jesus' commissioning address to his disciples on their first big outing without him. And he's not a red-faced coach at half-time giving a stirring speech to his players to go out there and win the game. His words are in fact a little anticlimactic.

They aren't the ones welcoming.

They are the ones being welcomed.

They're the ones receiving care and generosity and hospitality from others.

And it doesn't matter if the disciple is a prophet or a righteous person or even one of the least disciples, these little ones as Jesus calls them. By welcoming in these faithful folk, giving even the smallest cup of cold water, is enough for a reward in turn.

**There's a reciprocal relationship here between welcoming and blessing. Between followers of Jesus and those who welcome them in.**

In 1903, the Christian Reformed Church sent missionaries to New Mexico right on the edge of the Navajo Nation to set up a school. A boarding school. Rehoboth Mission School. Well meaning and well intentioned followers of Jesus went about the work of preaching the gospel to the indigenous community. But the harm they did in the name of Jesus would only become apparent much much later.

The children these missionaries taught, the Navajo and Zuni people they wanted to reach and welcome in, were made to understand that to be like Jesus was to be white, to be American. Preferably of the Dutch kind, too.

From everything these children could see from their teachers and what they were taught by these CRC missionaries about Jesus and what it means to be a follower of Christ, Jesus had nothing to do with Navajo culture or practices. Jesus did not look like them. Jesus had white skin, not brown.

And for these little ones to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God meant they had to leave their identity, their family name, and their cultural heritage behind.

In 2003, Rehoboth Christian School, as it's now called, marked 100 years since it's beginning as a boarding school run by missionaries. As part of the observance of that milestone, they brought together historians and denominational leaders, graduates and parents of current students, past and present teachers and school board members, to address the history of Rehoboth - through reflection, testimony, and confession.

A teacher from the school spoke and confessed the racist ideology that informed the school's early teaching:

We were so caught up in the arrogance of Western culture. A cultural superiority prevailed. It oozed out of us...Today, the term is institutional racism, and we acknowledge it. It took on a Dutch tint and tone at Rehoboth. Our comfortable, cloistered community has not been very good at welcoming those different from ourselves.

A denominational leader stood up and addressed how the missionaries did not see the indigenous leaders as equals and kept control in their own hands:

“Who gets to drive?” In the past, the CRC mission essentially said, “You can ride along, but you will have to wait to drive.” Despite good will, smiles, pats on the back, there is no question, in past days, who was behind the wheel. I look back and confess fear of losing control. And I confess a lack of faith to believe that we may be taught God’s love and how to love in a different way.

**As the stories went on and confessions were heard, the shape of the story of Rehoboth and the way that story has shaped what that school community looks like now began to emerge.**

Rehoboth was founded on a conditional welcome. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you have to be like us. Less indigenous. More European. A one-way welcome.

But as the years went on and the missionaries and their families and the teachers in the classroom were welcomed by the ones they intended to reach with the gospel, as they received the generosity and care and hospitality of their Navajo neighbours, as they built friendships and relationships, something else happened.

The cultural superiority of the missionaries began to be dismantled. The harm done by stripping all things Navajo from what it means to be a follower of Jesus became brutally apparent. And the need for listening, understanding, and learning began to take over. The missionaries passed the running of the school over to Navajo parents. Student residences were shuttered. The Navajo language was taught across all grades. And the gospel flourished.

And what it meant to be a follower of Jesus began to be less about being white, American, and Dutch, and more about being welcoming, forgiving, and humble.

One of the voices to contribute to the 100th anniversary of Rehoboth’s beginning was a local indigenous leader who reminded all those in attendance that reconciliation and reciprocal relationship is not a one-way communication but takes two-way commitment:

In reconciliation, confession alone is not the end. A commitment to sustaining a lifelong changed relationship is key to living in harmony.

**That one-way welcome became a reciprocal relationship of welcome and blessing.**

Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.

Jesus began his instructions to the disciples by sending them out into every town and village to preach the good news of the coming Kingdom of God and to heal what's broken and hurt. And Jesus promised his disciples that wherever they are welcomed, Jesus is welcomed too. And not only him but the one who sent him into the world to redeem it and us.

Whether we're the ones welcomed in and given a cup of cold water by someone very different from us, or we're the ones welcoming a disciple of Jesus in, Jesus shows up. Just like he promised.

**And where Jesus shows up, things change.**

Wrongs are righted.  
Brokenness is mended.  
Sins are confessed.  
Prejudices are dismantled.  
And the gospel flourishes.

**And where Jesus shows up, he changes us too.**

Jesus strips us of all the things we confuse with the gospel. Our ethnicity. Our rules. Our judgement of who is in and who is out. And even our assumptions that he looks like us. Rather than the other way around. And he reminds us why he sends out his disciples to preach and heal in the first place: Compassion. Jesus looked around with compassion on those who are broken and vulnerable, and instructs us to do the same.

As we go out into our towns and villages, into the broken places and relationships of our lives, to welcome and be welcomed...

May those around us know us as those who try to right wrongs, to mend brokenness, to confess our failures and sins.

May we humbly seek to not just welcome others but to learn what it means to be welcomed and changed by others.

And may we each be transformed more and more by the Spirit into the likeness of Jesus, so that when others see us, they see a Jesus they want to know more of.

**In the name of Jesus, the One who welcomes us. Amen.**