

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

We have two stories, the story of Jesus amazed by the unbelief of his home community, and the story of the disciples being sent out on their own mission trips.

The first story has always troubled me. Especially that verse that says “And he could do no deed of power there.” The thing that bothers me, is that we’re talking about Jesus here; he is the one who calms the storm and raises people from the dead. If he can do those things, why can’t he perform deeds of power in his own hometown? You’d think that would be a piece of cake! We’ll get back to this a little later...

The thing that gets my attention this morning is the idea of Welcome... We have Jesus with an uneasy welcome in his own hometown and we have the disciples sent out on their own mission trips with instructions concerning different welcoming circumstances.

Welcoming is a value we all share. In fact, a lot of us have little signs in our home or door mats that say welcome. We want people to feel at ease when they come over. And the same thing with church, we all want people to feel like this is a place where they can be comfortable and belong. That why we have greeters!

For me, welcoming is a posture, it is an openness to be with someone, without judgment, or any preconceived ideas. Because of this, it’s probably easier to extend a welcome to someone we **don’t** know than it is to extend a welcome someone we **do** know. Because when we know someone, we have a certain amount of memory and preconceived judgment about that person. And that could be good or bad...

Quick story...

In my old neighborhood in Austin, Tim across the street had an amazing man-cave and he loved Indian motorcycles. He had three of them, always polished up and on display. Tim put on a lot of miles; he lived for motorcycles!

On the east side of me was Art and he loved Harleys. On the west side of me was Willie and he had Hondas. Well, it wasn’t too long after living in that neighborhood that I got a Suzuki Vstrom dl650a... And I love my bike! Isn’t it amazing how powerful coveting is?

For the most part, my Austin neighbors got along well. But, I'd walk over to yak with Tim and he'd tell me that Art is a poser; someone who pretends to be a biker, he'd tell me "he doesn't know what he's talking about." And besides that, "he needs to cut his grass." And not only that, "his dog barks too much..."

Can you see where this is going? There was a little motorcycle coveting going on, a little rivalry going on, and a lot of judgment... And it wasn't very subtle... Art wasn't welcome at Tim's place... And Art knew it... It was kind of a strain in the neighborhood.

We not only covet personal belongings, we also covet one another's skills, status and attention. I love Brad Paisley, I think he's one of the most innovative guitarists I have ever heard. I wish I could play guitar like him! Unfortunately, I can't. And so, I'm a little jealous. I have this little love/hate thing going on with him.

And frankly this is what celebrity is... We all want to be like the movie stars or the athletes, but we can't and so we're a little jealous. Brad Paisley has a song that says, "when your celebrity it's adios reality..." He not only plays guitar well, he's a smart cookie... Something else for me to be jealous of...

And this is where we encounter Jesus this morning. In his home town, the locals all know he's something of a celebrity, they all agree he has done some wonderful things, but they're a little jealous and they take offense at him.

Can you imagine, they're probably saying things like, "Sure, He's a great teacher, but he should be spending more time with his family..." And instead of going to him for healing, they looked for faults; they sat in judgment of him. They were not very welcoming!

And so I wonder, if the reason why Jesus doesn't do great deeds of power in his hometown is not so much about the strength of his divinity, as much as it is do to with humanity and how easily we take offense at one another.

Especially and particularly in our home communities, we need to find ways to be loving kind and gracious to one another. It's easy to extend a welcome to those people we like; it's sometimes difficult to extend a welcome to those we don't like. And in the body of Christ we are called to love everyone, to be welcoming to everyone... And that is difficult...

Being in a posture to welcome puts us in a position to be vulnerable. And that takes intentionality and courage. Welcoming is opening our lives to change because of what we might experience. Jesus directly instructs the disciples not to take anything at all and to go to the different towns and stay with them.

Jesus is telling them to be completely vulnerable, and to see what happens. The text says that “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

Every person on the face of this earth wants to be loved. And the greatest way to love someone is to listen to them. And to listen so deeply, that in fact you find yourself vulnerable to change because of what you hear.

And maybe you won't change your mind about something, but maybe you'll change your heart. Maybe you will find empathy for them in their circumstances. And we're not called to agree with one another, but we are called to love one other.

And the good news today is that in welcoming, in the listening and loving one another, transformation happens. The posture of welcome is a posture to change... to be invited into a new way of love-- to be a new creation, transformed into the larger body of Christ. And I believe it, because I've seen it.

Quick story... I grew up going to church every Sunday. And in the church my family went to, we heard a lot about how God punished sinners. I think they were trying to scare us into heaven. I took it all very seriously. I tried and tried and tried to stop that sinning thing, but I always fell short.

I was a sensitive kid, it seemed to me that God was disappointed in me, that for some reason God didn't like me, and consequently I was going to hell. To me the choice boiled down to believing in God and going to hell-- or just stop believing in God.

When I was a teenager it felt more life giving not to believe in God. So I stopped going to church, and was pretty negative about anything that had to do with religion. And I wonder if a lot of people who say their atheists today have had a similar experience.

Anyway, when the kids were young, Kris wanted them to go to church. I wasn't too happy about it. We tried a church in Red Wing, we even went to an enquirer's class; they got into a big argument about adult baptism and infant baptism. We nixed that church.

We then tried a church in Cottage Grove, and it felt a lot like the other church... Finally, I said, “If it's so important to you, let's bring them to that church in the neighborhood.” I can drop the kids off and pick them

up. You're happy, I'm happy, the kids are happy... Everybody's happy... So, Kris came here and made arrangements for the kids to be in Sunday school.

Everything was going well, until one day, my daughter Johanna said, "Dad, we're singing in church next Sunday you have to come and hear us." Oye, what do you do? So, we came here to worship one Sunday, not knowing a soul, we sat in the middle over there.

I didn't grow up in a Lutheran church; we must have stuck out like a sore thumb. Shirley and Alvie sat close to us. Shirley quickly noticed I had no idea what was going on. She showed us the bulletin and how to follow along in the green hymnal. It was all Greek to me, but I was so touched that someone cared enough to help us. It was a little hospitality, and it meant a lot!

Confession and forgiveness also floored me. So different than the church I grew up in. Being in bondage to sin was a truth I knew in the core of my being. And still, God forgave... that was fundamentally different than anything I had ever heard.

This church became a place for me that cared about my kids, cared about us, and spoke the truth about God... You welcomed us into the life of this church. And this is where I heard the gospel for the first time ever... From Pastor Iver...

I'm standing in front of you today, because you welcomed me and my family. And I believe in miracles because I've seen it with my own two eyes, and now, so have you... Amen.