



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “A Hundred Thousand Welcomes”

Matthew 10:40-42

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“No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” That’s what we try to communicate to all who come through the doors of Broad Street Presbyterian Church.

Words of welcome are on today’s bulletin cover: Céad Mile Fáilte. (1) If you’re familiar with Irish Gaelic, you know that the words don’t look like they sound. They are pronounced “Cade Me’-lah Fall’-the.” Their translation is also there - A Hundred Thousand Welcomes. Wherever you come from, whoever you are, you are welcome, a hundred thousand times, Céad Mile Fáilte. As followers of Jesus, as a church, it’s who we want to be. But welcoming all people isn’t easy.

Our reading from Matthew’s gospel comes at the end of a chapter in which Jesus prepares his disciples to be sent out. They’re to do what Jesus does – care, cure; preach. He sends them out without support or defense – no money, no backpack; no shepherd’s staff. They are completely dependent on the hospitality of others. If they don’t receive welcome he instructs them to shake off the dust from their feet and leave. At last we get to today’s verses. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” When disciples accept welcome, it will be as if Jesus himself has received it.

Every Sunday, at a neighboring church, maintenance staff unlocks the doors at 8:00 a.m. Each Sunday a man walks in, carrying a rolled sleeping bag, and a backpack. He uses the restroom to wash and takes care to clean up. He walks to the back of the sanctuary and places his items under the pew. He sits there all morning. He listens to the choir warm up and stays for worship. He stands when everyone stands and sits when everyone sits. When the pastor processes out, they exchange smiles, sometimes handshakes. He enjoys coffee hour and a few treats. He’s not disruptive. He doesn’t ask for money. After worship he leaves, until the next Sunday. (2)

We wish all relationships with homeless folk would go this well! It sounds too good to be true, but it is true. No manipulation, no request for cash. He knows he’s welcome and will be treated with respect. He doesn’t use the church’s hospitality for his gain. It’s easy to want to give him a cup of cold water. Maybe he’s unusual. Our experience says he is the exception, not the rule.

Which brings me to our location here at the corner of Garfield and Broad. Sometimes Sunday morning visitors in the building or in the parking lot ask for money. Ironically, the best way to be hospitable is to refuse to give them cash. Suddenly this sermon about welcome is sounding very unwelcoming! But trust me, when any of us give cash word spreads quickly. Instead, we ask you to kindly yet firmly say “no” or “sorry.” Invite the visitor to enjoy coffee and animal crackers, or any special food – and often we have really good special food - as long as they don’t ask others for money. If you want to help people get off the street, to address root causes of homelessness or addiction, we suggest you give directly to organizations with such expertise.

What we’re asking you to do on Sunday mornings is limit the transactional nature of relationships. In our culture cash is often transactional, not relational. Sometimes we are tempted to use cash to avoid discomfort. I

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

encourage you, instead of giving cash, to introduce the person to me or Amy or to a member of our maintenance staff or to an usher. Broad Street is a church, not a bank. Let our focus be on providing welcome - hospitality.

Each of us is deeply conditioned, maybe even hardwired, to have two opposite responses to a stranger – both fear and fascination. Both are part of our survival equipment. As a species, learning how to balance our two responses is one of our greatest challenges. Scripture’s mandate to show hospitality to strangers comes at a time of urgent need. Our faith calls us to work for a world where strangeness doesn’t foster estrangement, but engagement.

Author Henri Nouwen, in his book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, writes:

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place. (3)

We can never predict when a stranger, or a new idea, or a different custom will function as grace in our lives, as part of God’s project of weaving the world together in love. Take the story of Ernesto: He stops by a church on Sunday and asks for money for a bus pass. He’s told the church doesn’t give out money for bus passes. Ernesto says he’s been to five churches and none will help. He has blisters on his feet from so much walking. We look at Ernesto and see a human being, and so we ask, “Would food help?” We walk together into coffee hour. Ernesto puts some food on a plate and eats. He says, “I have what I need for now.” Then he leaves. (4)

Sometimes a stranger offers a blessing that informs our lives or even rocks our world. Ernesto’s comment “I have what I need for now,” gets me wondering to what degree any of us can say that about our own lives. “I have what I need for now.” How often do I feel there’s not enough, not enough time or creativity or patience? Ernesto’s comment jolts and blesses me. I’m reminded of God’s abundance; that ultimately all will be well. When we welcome the stranger we welcome the Christ.

Ernesto invites us to give ourselves, which is harder than reaching for our wallet. He also challenges us to know one another’s names. How convenient that this is a name tag Sunday! Wear a tag today, and make a point of calling one another by name.

Think about your own journey with this church. If we’re honest, many of us first showed up out of need. It may not have been for a bus pass, but it may have been to be less afraid or to be well or because we are hungry for God. Each of us comes with our own emptiness, our own need. Did someone tell you about Broad Street, did someone welcome you; did a connection start small and continue to grow? Many are here because of the hospitality of others. Together we try to be a community that sees Christ “in friend and stranger.”

The life of faith is composed of a hundred thousand small gestures. It can seem like such a little thing, offering a cup of cold water. Yet, according to Jesus, no gesture is small. All things done in faith have significance; all things done in love last. Even a cup of cold water can make a difference. Or a plate of food. So can welcoming the new kid at camp, or listening to a tearful stranger in a waiting room. A cup of cold water can be writing a letter to a congressperson about an issue, or showing up for a march to protest an abuse of power. A cup of cold water is thanking a law enforcement officer or someone in the military for their service. Offering a cup of cold water could be buying some school supplies for a teacher whose budget has been cut or supporting one of the neighborhood ministries here at church.

According to Jesus, each and every small gesture matters. Every act of mercy rings through the eons and across the universe. I have seen you participate in this. I marvel at how you extend God’s welcome, both inside and outside these walls; through neighborhood ministries, and at hospitals, in health care centers, in class rooms and

board rooms and courtrooms, in homes and restaurants, in neighborhoods, with friends and family, and with strangers.

You, all of you, in countless ways, are making this world a little better, a little more trustworthy; a little more joyful. Through your gestures of love and mercy and compassion; through your cups of cold water, helping hands, and listening ears you are Jesus' hands and feet and heart for others. Céad Mile Fáilte. A hundred thousand welcomes.

So whose welcome is it, anyway? This welcome we extend and receive, whose is it? Well, it doesn't belong to me or you. It's not ours, but God's; it's God's welcome. It's the welcome Jesus extends as he opens his arms wide on the cross, as he dies embracing the world. At this table, the Risen Christ is host. And all of us are guests.

On this holiday weekend I share a story. It happened on a previous Election Day when a church member worked the polls. She's been there for many hours, from early morning until late in the evening. It's nearing 9:30 p.m., when she and her colleagues can finally close up for the night. Just as they are getting ready to do so, a woman shows up to vote. She is a new American citizen and she is excited to vote for the first time. Since English isn't her first language she has brought a friend to help her translate. She takes a long time in the voting booth; 9:30 p.m. comes and goes. And yet that's not the church member's primary recollection. Her eyes tear up as she remembers the moment - the look on the woman's face after she presses the button to submit her ballot. She is aglow with joy; happy, humbled. For our friend in the pew, the face of an immigrant is for her a lens, to engage with a stranger and to see our country at its best, providing welcome; a place of hospitality.

With all the challenges facing us as a nation, we can take the goodness of our democracy for granted. We can lose touch with our history, how people of all backgrounds have struggled and fought and died for freedom, including the opportunity to vote.

All welcome and hospitality begin with God. Céad Mile Fáilte. A hundred thousand welcomes. At Broad Street we extend welcome, not to change people, but to offer space where change can take place. Together, may we gather at God's table in an ever-widening circle of welcome. Amen.

1. Céad Mile Fáilte is pronounced "Cade Me' -lah Fall' -the."
2. Story of a regular visitor at First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, as told by Associate Pastor Emily Corzine.
3. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*.
4. Story of a recent encounter, as told by Associate Pastor Emily Corzine.