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Year A
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Holy God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out upon us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture, our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things that pertain to life and holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WARM AND WELCOMING

MATTHEW 10:40-42

Do not look now, but it is almost July. July: To the pessimistic among us, the summer is half-over; to the optimistic, there is at least another month of vacation to enjoy before school is back in session. For me, it seems inevitable that this will be the year remembered as the one that Lydia and I moved to Tuscaloosa; and, thanks be to God, July signals the beginning of the end of a lengthy transition. If all goes well tomorrow, I will have an address in Tuscaloosa to call my own: not the church's address, not one of your addresses, but an address that says to the world that we are here to stay! And, oh does it feel good...

For me, the second half of the year (and especially the summer) affords an opportunity to apply all the education and experience that I have acquired through the professional conferences that I have attended. You will remember that I participated in the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis in May and that I have been on the campus of the Chautauqua Institution for the past week. The experiences are vastly different from one another. The Festival of Homiletics is pure study leave. It is a sermon followed by a workshop followed by sermon followed by a workshop, and nothing---repeat "nothing"---disrupts the rhythm of the conference. It is an event by clergy for clergy where it is not uncommon to hear the phrases like "exegesis" and "giving units" in casual conversation. If Lydia went with me to this event, she probably would not go to church as an adult, because it, not unlike a meeting of presbytery or the

General Assembly, involves looking behind the curtain to find that the Wizard of Oz is nothing but a funny-looking man with a strange sense of humor. One who enjoys eating sausage probably should avoid watching it being made.

Lydia does go with me to Chautauqua (which is why I consider this expedition to be one-part study leave and one-part vacation). There, she participates in children's programming that emphasizes recreation and the arts. On Friday, for the first time in her life, she went sailing and declared that it was "awesome" (which is high praise coming from a girl who will be in the 4th grade this fall). Meanwhile, I was in a pattern of morning worship, an NPR-like lecture, lunch and departmental programming in the afternoon (during which, by the way, I met Andrew Sorenson, former President of the University of Alabama and the current and retiring President of one of my alma maters the University of South Carolina).

The Department of Religion's featured lecturer was Karen Armstrong who fancies herself as an historian who dabbles in comparative religions. Or is it is the other way around? She writes prolifically on the nature of Scripture and the history of the church and has recently published biographies of Muhammad and Siddhartha Gautama. Obviously, her academic project is ambitious. I have been studying Christianity intensively since the first Bush administration and feel vaguely qualified to speak authoritatively on the subject; and yet Armstrong is comfortable making bold pronouncements on Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Islam (with occasional forays into Hinduism and paganism). In search of an idea that brings all religious peoples of the world together, she concludes that the wisdom of the world's religions, taken collectively, points to a common ethic: compassion.

Compassion is not synonymous with hospitality (which is where I plot today's Gospel lesson on the continuum of biblical themes), but they are intimately related. The operative verb in Jesus' statement is "welcome": "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.” The language seems clear and concise---be welcoming---but what does hospitality look like? The example that Christ himself provides is “giving even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.” Always the teacher, always the Rabbi, Jesus reassures his disciples that if they do this, they will not lose their reward. Apparently, giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty child does not come naturally. Otherwise, Jesus would not be lecturing the disciples on the subject of hospitality, and in so doing, blurring the distinction between hospitality and compassion. Apparently, exercising compassion was not any safer then than it is now. Otherwise, Jesus would not have to guarantee a reward. The prophets, righteous men and women and children that Christ calls to embrace have next-to-nothing (if not nothing) to lose. By embracing them, we put ourselves at risk to be mocked by those who mock them and to be embraced by those who embrace them. As we embrace others, Christ embraces us.

Chautauqua is an ecumenical effort striving to become an interfaith experience. The morning worship services are unabashedly Christian, but the religion department actively pursues Jewish and Muslim leadership (and has for the five years I have participated in the program). In the center of the campus is an amphitheater. On the edge of this facility is denominational housing. The United Church of Christ has a place beside the United Methodists, and the Roman Catholics are situated between the United Methodists and the Presbyterians. On Sundays, each group worships separately before coming together for the campus-wide service serving as a visible reminder of the unity that we have in Christ and the diversity (or dare I say division?) that we have in our practice of his faith.

The chaplain at the Presbyterian House this past week was William Carter, who pastors First Presbyterian Church, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. He is a jazz musician among other things, and on Thursday, he led a jazz vespers service featuring music inspired by the Psalms that he composed while on sabbatical. His song “The Last Waltz” was written in memory of Brent Dugan, whose story I did not

know until it was introduced to me midst the sadness and the hope of a soulful jazz sequence. Dugan was a PC(USA) pastor who served a congregation in Pittsburg and struggled with the church's stance on ordination given his commitment to Christ's body and the way that God created him. He was betrayed by a partner who allowed messages from Dugan on his answering machine to be broadcast on television. Dugan responded by writing a note in which he explained that he would rather commit suicide than "besmirch the Gospel of Jesus Christ." And thus he died rejected and despised (not unlike Christ himself).

Since I knew that the summer schedule was going to be chaotic, I sent a month's worth of Orders of Worship to Bill Henderson and Carolyn MacVicar early in June. When I returned to this Scripture and to the sermon title to which I had already committed for this Sunday, it occurred to me that a better title would be "(Luke)warm and Welcoming," because the hypocrisy in church signs that proclaim that this or that congregation is "warm and welcoming" is appalling. Human insecurities and prejudices being what they are, what congregation is truly warm and welcoming to everybody? Would Pat Robertson or James Dobson feel welcomed here? Maybe they would, because almost without exception, all of the visitors who have passed through those doors since February have commented on how warm and welcoming you are (and when they say that to me, I say, "Oh, that's nothing. They have let me move in with them!").

May God forgive any cynicism that has crept into any sermon that I have preached (or will preach): Cynicism is a form of pessimism that occurs when we are preoccupied with what is rather than what will be, when we focus on what we are capable of doing as opposed to what God is doing in and through our Lord and Savior. Christ's body---the church---is bigger than any one of us (or any one congregation), and thanks be to God that our body within the body---the PC(USA)---continues to gravitate toward "More Light." At the 218th General Assembly this week, the church began a process that would include the Belhar Confession, which is a strong statement from South Africa on human

rights, into our *Book of Confessions* while recognizing that the language of the Heidelberg Catechism had been modified to promote prejudices that are actually contrary to the spirit of the statement. The assembly also moved toward eliminating the “fidelity and chastity” phrase from the *Book of Order*, a decision that will now go to presbyteries for approval. Such an act would not change the past, but the church does not have to live there. The church, in fact, is not called to live there. Organic movements live as institutions die. The warmth of a prophetic and righteous movement is welcoming, and by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, the church is capable of acting compassionately even when individual members are not. Now to the ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.