

Following a Welcoming God

Scott Mehl | John 20:19-23

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Introduction

Our main passage today is from the gospel of end of the gospel of John.

It focuses on the words of Jesus after he has risen from the dead.

- It provides an encouragement for his disciples...
- ...and an instruction for them.

Now, if you've been around church very long, the most famous post-resurrection encouragement and instruction you're familiar with is probably *The Great Commission*, recorded in Matthew 28.

- At the end of the gospel of John we find a very similar "commission" to the disciples, but with a slightly different angle.

John 20:19–23

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

God's Welcome to Us

There's a lot we could focus on in this passage, but today I want to zoom in on the actual words of Jesus. Think of this as a "red letter" sermon.

As we focus in on Jesus words to his disciples this night we're going to see three important aspects of God's welcome that will help frame the entire series we're in the midst of right now.

1. God's welcome *to* us.
2. God's welcome *through* us.
3. God's welcome *in* us.

The first thing we hear from Jesus, after he miraculously appears in this house where a number of his disciples were hiding together.

- As we read in Luke, this included both a majority of the apostles.
- But there were other disciples / followers of Jesus there with them too.

And Jesus shows up in their midst, and the first thing he says is: “Peace be with you.”

We could easily downplay the significance of this phrase.

- It’s not an uncommon standard greeting.
- The Hebrew word for peace, “shalom,” is still used as a standard greeting in Israel today.

It’s like when you open the door at your house or apartment and tell someone “Welcome!”

But Jesus’ next action, combined with the context of this moment, brings a different kind of weight and significance to these words.

Think about what the disciples had just been through.

They were with Jesus when he was arrested in the garden.

- They had seen him taken away.
- And they immediately went into hiding.
- They may have found ways to witness the trials, beating, and mocking of Jesus...but they did so in secret.
- When confronted, Peter even blatantly denied knowing Jesus three times.

They didn’t organize a rebellion...they didn’t hatch a scheme to free Jesus...they hid.

And now, three days after the crucifixion, they were still hiding.

- They were locked inside a house...paralyzed with fear.
- They weren’t out defending the reputation of the wrongly executed Jesus.
- They weren’t out spreading the message of the kingdom of God they had been so thoroughly taught.
- They were cowering!

And Jesus...a resurrected Jesus...shows up in their midst!

- Being so consumed by fear...how do you think they expected Jesus to react?

They had just forsaken him!

They had hidden during his time of need!

They had fled during his crucifixion!

They may have expected condemnation, rebuke, or anger.

They may have expected Jesus' disappointment.

But, instead, they receive his pronouncement of peace.

And if you think I may be making too much of this simple greeting...this is driven home by the fact that he repeats it!

After greeting his cowering disciples, Jesus showed them the wounds in his hands and his side.

- He was showing them that it truly was him.
- He was showing them what he had endured to redeem them.

And then...he repeats himself...and says to them again, "Peace be with you."

When we think of our relationship with God...and the thought of coming into his presence...we often think of ourselves as not as children (as members of the family) but guests in God's house.

When you're a guest in someone's house you're on your best behavior because you're not sure how welcome you *actually* are.

But what if you were a guest in someone's house right after you had abandoned them in their time of need.

- You wouldn't just be on your best behavior.
- Your heart would be pounding.
- You'd be walking through the house in awkwardness and fear.

Not only would you not be sure if you were welcome...you'd be pretty sure you're *not* welcome.

A brief, introductory "Welcome!" when you walked in the door probably wouldn't assuage your fears.

But what if your host, the one whom you had abandoned, followed up the introductory "Welcome!" by walking up to you, taking ahold of your shoulders, looking into your eyes, and repeating again: "Welcome!" and embracing you.

The first "welcome" may leave some questions...but the meaning of the second is unmistakable.

And while Jesus' first statement of "Peace be with you" may not assuage the disciples' fears...the second one most assuredly did.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know...and in recording it, the Apostle John wants us to know...that there is nothing you can do that will put you beyond the reach of the grace...the peace...the welcome of Jesus available through faith in him.

In the very next chapter of the gospel of John...we see Jesus personalize this same point for Peter...the one who had explicitly denied and disowned Jesus three times.

In a loving and gentle act of redemption, Jesus mirrors Peter's three denials by asking him three separate times: "Do you love me?"

Each time Peter is given the opportunity clearly and unreservedly declare his love for Jesus to his face (an opportunity he never imagined he'd have).

- The final time Peter replies emphatically: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

And then in light of this act of reconciliation, in light of Peter experiencing first hand the *welcome* of the Savior we've been talking about these past few weeks...Jesus ends his conversation with Peter where their relationship began in the first place, with the words:

"...Follow me."

Transition: And here we see the connection between the welcome God has extended to his disciples (to us!) and the lives of welcome he is calling us to live as a result.

The first aspect of God's welcome we see is: God's welcome *to* us.

But God's welcome to us is intended to *also* bring about God's welcome *through* us.

God's Welcome Through Us

Immediately after Jesus' second assertion of "Peace be with you!" he follows it up with a pronouncement: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

As the Father has sent me...to welcome you into our family.

I am now sending you...to welcome others into our family.

Thinking back to our house guest who walks in the door, it's as though the host:

1. Cries out "Welcome!" from the other room.
2. Walks over, looks into the guest's eyes and affirms to them: "You are welcome!"
3. Embraces them...enveloping them tangibly in their love.
4. And then pulls back...still holding onto their shoulders...looks into the guest's eyes...
5. "I want *you* to help me host tonight...I want you to welcome others."

But, as we've said, the analogy of a house guest is problematic.

- All too often we feel like guests in God's household.
- But we're not guests!
- We're his children!

- We *live* there.
- It's *our* house too!

Which, again, is where the spiritual concept of adoption is so helpful and powerful.

Jesus is declaring to us...that *just as* God the Father sent God the Son into the world to fulfill a specific purpose and welcome his children into his family...God the Son is now sending *us* into the world to fulfill a specific purpose and welcome his children into his family.

Isn't it incredible that God wants to extend his welcome *through* us!

- But doesn't this just make sense.
- If we're a family, of course this is the way it would work!

When Lara gave birth to one of our children...if she were the only one to welcome that child into our family, something would be horribly wrong.

Similarly, if she and I, as the parents, were to welcome a new child into our family...but our other children didn't...something would also be horribly wrong.

When we welcome a child into our family...it's an act of the entire family.

And *every* member of the family is called to welcome that new child or sibling in ways that are:

- Intentional, Sacrificial, and Lavish

Because we're family!

I see this is a smaller way when my kids welcome other people (particularly kids) into our home.

When any child enters our house, I could let them know that they are welcome as loudly or repeatedly or detailed as possible...but they *experience* the welcome, not when I *tell them* they are welcome but when my kids (their peers) show them that they're welcome.

They experience welcome in our home when my kids take them by the hand and run with them into their room.

- When they explore legos together.
- Or when they break out the doll clothes together.

And few things bring me more joy than seeing kids that feel comfortable and safe in our home because they've experienced genuine welcome from my kids.

That's what our home is for! That's what we're here for!

And my kids' ability to intentionally, sacrificially, and lavishly welcome other kids into our home is the natural outflow of the fact that they view it as *their* home too.

- They don't think of themselves as guests.

There is no doubt in their mind...that is *their* house...that is *their* room.

- Even though *I'm* the one that pays the mortgage.
- Even though *I'm* the one that pays all the bills.
- Even though they legally own *nothing* in that place.
- They know it's *their* home.
- Why? Because they know they're my children.

And that confidence they have in their identity as a part of our family...frees them to welcome others into our family and into our home:

- Intentionally
- Sacrificially
- Lavishly.

On the flip side...this is why unreciprocating entitlement is my biggest pet-peeve in our home.

- I *love* to see my kids take what they have been given and share it with others.
- I *love* to see my kids take the privilege of being in our family and welcoming others in.
- I *love* to see my kids affirm and reaffirm one another's place in our family as they extend the welcome they've received from Lara and I to one another.

But nothing drives me more nuts than when one of them acts as though what they've been given is theirs to keep, hoard, and produce an air of superiority in the house.

- When they ignore kids who feel uncomfortable in our house because they want to play by themselves.
- Or when they refuse to share out of some misguided notion that what makes our stuff special is inherent to the *stuff* itself.
- Or, even worse, when they don't feel like they can welcome others because they're insecure about their own place in the family.

But we are all tempted to fall into these same patterns of thinking.

- When God welcomes us into his family and calls us to welcome others as well...it seems like living that out should be a no brainer.

- On paper it all makes sense.
- So why don't we constantly live our lives with that welcoming orientation?

Having experienced the welcome of God, what keeps us from living lives that are intentionally, sacrificially, and lavishly welcoming others?

I think, just like my kids, our fallen hearts often fall into the traps of selfishness and self-pity.

- We lose sight of the magnitude of the welcome we've received.
- We conveniently forget that extending God's welcome is one of the central purposes of our lives.

But it's into this predicament that God provides a supernatural solution.

As frustrating as it might be, every parent knows that it takes a supernatural act of God for kids to step away from their self-satisfying, entitled instincts and be genuinely compassionate, empathetic, and welcoming.

We can put all the parenting practices we want in place, but only the transformation of their heart that comes through genuine faith in Christ, and the indwelling work of the Spirit can truly transform a selfish child's heart.

And that's true for every one of us adults too.

Which is why it brings such an incredible hope to know that, through faith in Christ, we have not only been forgiven and adopted into his family...we have *also* been indwelt by his Spirit.

In addition to God's welcome to us...and the call to live out God's welcome *through us*...the power and reality of God's welcome has come to dwell *in us*.

God's Welcome In Us

So Jesus shows up in this locked room and greets his disciples: "Peace be with you!" Welcome!

And then he shows them, in a close, intimate, and very specific way...that it truly is him...

And he repeats himself: "Peace be with you."

It's like he draws them close to affirm to them: "You are welcome."

And then he reveals to them: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

And then...and this is so fascinating...he breaths on them...and his Spirit enters them.

John 20:22-23

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

There’s so much here that we don’t have time to dive into!

- Jesus breathes on them.
- Just as when God breathed on Adam, giving him life.
- God is now breathing on man again, bestowing his indwelling presence and eternal life.

And when he gives them the power to forgive sins, he’s obviously not delegating the authority of determining who is forgiven and who is not.

- As we read elsewhere in Scripture: Only God can forgive sins.

But God the Spirit is coming to dwell inside their souls...

- So that they (so that we!) might be the tangible embodiment of his presence on earth.
- So that we might deliver his message that forgiveness and redemption are only available through faith in Christ.
- So that we might deliver his message that apart from Christ there is no forgiveness, we stand condemned and alienated from God.
- So that we might be his representatives on earth.

The picture I couldn’t get out of my head this week was of a company town.

A company town was a widespread practice 100 years ago.

- At their peak there were more than 2,500 company towns in the US.
- In fact, 3% of the US population lived in company towns at one time.

A company town was a place where essentially everything (the stores, the houses, the restaurants) were owned by the town’s main employer (usually a factory of some kind).

Now, as you can imagine, this often didn’t work out that well for the workers.

- It’s not hard to imagine what could go wrong when...
- ...the same company that employs you also sells you your groceries...
- ...and owns your house...and owns the land your church is built on.

The quality of the system depended completely on the morality and benevolence of the company.

But one of the best and longest lasting examples of a company town was right here in California.

Scotia, California was an active company town owned by Pacific Lumber for almost a hundred years, from the 1890s until 1985.

- For that entire time, Pacific Lumber was owned and operated by one family:
- The Simon Murphy family.
- In general, the Murphy family seemed to treat the employees / citizens of the town well.
- Rent was affordable....Things were maintained.
- Generations of workers raised their families in Scotia.
- And it earned a reputation as a desirable place to live.

Now, I want you to imagine living in Scotia.

- But not just as an employee of Pacific Lumber.
- Not just as the spouse of an employee of Pacific Lumber.
- What if you were living in Scotia, California...as a member of the Murphy family.

Maybe you're not Simon Murphy himself...

- ...but you're Simon Murphy, Jr.
- ...or you're Simon's grandson or granddaughter.

Everywhere you went in town.

- You'd be you...but you'd also be *known* as a member of the Murphy family.
- You'd be you...but you'd also represent the Murphy family.
- You'd be you...but everyone you met would be living in a town that your family owns.
- ...everyone you met would be living and working under the benevolent care of your family.

Don't miss the significance of what is happening when God the Son sends his disciples into the world and then God the Spirit comes to dwell inside them.

As Jesus' disciples...we are more than couriers sent to deliver a message.

We are his children...indwelt by his Spirit...sent to embody his presence in our world.

We are the representatives of the ultimate owner and creator of the world.

God owns everything!

- This is *his* world.
- And we are *his* hosts...*his* representatives...in our city.

As the hymn reminds us:

*This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.*

And I believe it is fundamentally important for you to not simply hear this, but truly believe it.

- The story that you tell yourself regarding your presence in Missoula *matters*!
- How you view yourself in your city changes things!
- How God wants you to view yourself in our city changes things!

I'm afraid that most Christians view themselves as visitors...just trying to survive.

Or we view ourselves as permanent residents...just trying to make your plot of land as comfortable as possible.

But remember what God says specifically about your presence in this world

(and consequently your presence in Missoula):

You are God's hosts sent to welcome people into abundant life...into the kingdom of light.

Matthew 5:14

"You are the light of the world..."

You are Christ's ambassadors...God's representatives sent specifically to *this* city at *this* time.

2 Corinthians 5:20

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us...

You are the temple of God...the very household of God.

1 Corinthians 3:16

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

When you welcome people into your life...you are welcoming them into the presence of the Spirit of God!

- God is not simply welcoming *through* you.
- *His* welcome is manifest *in* you.

When you're driving and someone is waiting to cross the street...God the Spirit is present behind the wheel...how might they experience God's welcome?

When someone is standing next to you at the grocery store...God the Spirit is present right next to them...how might they experience God's welcome?

When someone moves in next door...they are moving into the presence of God the Spirit...how might they experience God's welcome?

When someone joins your team at work...they are collaborating in the presence of the Spirit of God...how might they experience God's welcome?

Every time someone in your city comes in contact with any one of you...they are in the presence of someone who has been sent to their neighborhood, store, or workplace...to represent the one true God of the universe...to manifest his welcoming presence in our city.

Conclusion

I want to encourage you to think differently about yourself as you go through your days and your weeks...I want to encourage you to increasingly not only see yourself through God's eyes...but to see your presence here and purpose for which you have been sent here through his eyes too.

Because *this* is who we are...and *this* is why we're here:

- To manifest his presence...and his welcome...to a lonely, angry, and confused world that is dying for true and lasting hope.
- What an overwhelming privilege.