

Series: Words of Welcome – How to Be the Perfect Host

Part II: Who Welcomed You?

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Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. – Acts 9:1-19, NIV

Last week we began talking about words of welcome and if you were here, you know we spoke of a God who welcomes each one of us just like the father did in the story of the prodigal son. Without judgment or condemnation, that father welcomed home the son who had lost his way. We said that each one of us has been welcomed home by God in the same way. That understanding of being welcomed first by God is the foundation for everything we plan to talk about today and in the coming weeks.

Can you remember a time in your life when you felt welcomed by someone? Maybe it was a time when you didn't feel like you were part of a group, but someone reached out to you in a way that made a difference to you. Mary Ann Bird tells the story of something that happened to her in her book, *The Whisper Test*. She tells it this way:

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me. There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored — Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy — a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test. ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back — things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl."

Those words — those welcoming, loving words, changed her life. I wonder what or Who prompted Mrs. Leonard to say that? My guess is that it was the same voice that spoke to Paul in the story we read earlier, and to Ananias in telling him to go to Paul.

The story is one of those classic Bible stories — like the one we looked at last week — the prodigal son. In our culture, even those who do not go to church probably know what it means to have a "Damascus road experience" like the one Paul, who was still called "Saul" in our story, went through. (I'll call him "Paul" because that is how most of us know him now) Paul was a devout Pharisee who thought he was doing the work of God by hunting and persecuting these members of this Jewish sect that were referred to as "The Way." (Acts 9:2, NIV) Paul had already seen to it that Stephen was tried and stoned to death. Now he was on his way to Damascus with letters from the authorities in Jerusalem allowing him to hunt down Christians and bring them back for trial. It was while he was on the road that a bright light appears to him and a voice calls him by name and asks him why he is persecuting the one speaking. Paul doesn't know who this voice is, but he calls him/it "Lord." The voice says that he is Jesus, and he tells Paul to go to the city for further instructions. The others around Paul see the light, but don't know who it is. Paul is blinded and has to be led by the hand to Damascus.

About this time God appears in a vision to Ananias -- a Christian who lives in Damascus -- and God tells him to find this man and place his hands on him to restore his sight. Ananias has heard of this man who has Christians killed and put in prison — not the kind of person most Christians would go looking for. But God assures Ananias that he has big plans for Paul -- including telling Paul how much he will have to suffer. Again, not the kind of message you want to take to someone who may be out to have you killed.

But Ananias goes anyway -- telling Paul the words he was to hear, healing his eye sight, baptizing him, feeding him and helping him to get his strength back so that he could do things that were greater than either one of them could ever imagine. Most of the time when we hear this story, we tend to focus on Paul and his conversion, but today I want to focus on Ananias, because without his

willingness to reach out and welcome Paul into the family of God, *none of us might be sitting here today.*

I say that because while Paul was called by Jesus himself in that vision on the road to Damascus, it took someone else reaching out to Paul to actually lead him along in the faith. Paul didn't understand what had happened on that road and he was pretty helpless at that point. But, Ananias was the one who welcomed Paul into the faith. Just think of it -- if Paul, the architect of the early church without whom the gospel of Jesus Christ would not have spread – if Paul needed to be welcomed, then what does that say about us?

As a pastor I have never met someone who came to Christian faith all by themselves. It just doesn't happen that way. One of the early church fathers said that there was no salvation outside of the church. (Cyprian) What I think he meant by that was that somehow our believing is tied back to someone else who was a part of the church, who went out of their way speak to us or to do something that began a process of welcoming us into our relationship with God through faith in Christ. We can no more spontaneously create Christian faith on our own than we can be born all on our own. At least two parents got together at some point in order to give us birth. In the same way someone had to begin by welcoming us, introducing us and pointing us to God.

So who welcomed you? Think about it. Who were those persons God used in your life to bring you closer to God? I can name the people God used in my life – John, Roy, Arnold, Pete, Rosemary, Charles, Dan, Skip, C.S., Jim, Ben – persons who preached, taught, nurtured, wrote books – all of which God used to welcome me again and again into a deeper relationship with God through Jesus the Christ.

When I talk to folks around JCPC, I begin to hear about their spiritual journeys and how God brought them to this church. I hear stories about how someone in this church reached out to them to join a small group, or who sat with them at the hospital, or they simply made them feel at home. God uses folks here at JCPC to welcome others. *My hope is that this church would be known as a place where people always feel welcomed.* My hope is that no one would ever come here and feel like no one reached out to them or spoke to them, but from the moment they came here – maybe even before they ever come here – they have an experience of welcome. It's why we do things like have greeters, with whom I met with this morning for training, because we want them to know how important it is to welcome others in the name of Christ. Maybe some of you need to find Seth Davies this morning and say that you want to be a greeter so that you can welcome others in the name of Christ.

This morning I want to invite you to do three things. First of all, I want to invite you to *thank God for those who have welcomed you in the faith.* Another way to think about this would be to thank God for our spiritual roots. As we said earlier, we did not spontaneously become Christians – others were involved. Even this church did not just spring up on its own. Last week, and with our special offering for New Church Development, we noted how our Presbytery and other churches felt the need to start a church here, so they bought the land and called Larry Wood to be the founding pastor. That presbytery is part of the larger Presbyterian church that traces its roots back to 1788 when the first presbytery met in Philadelphia. Many of those gathered there could trace their roots and influences back to Scotland where the reformation had taken hold. Those in Scotland, like John Knox, were influenced by their time with John Calvin in Geneva where the protestant reformation was in full

swing. Those Protestants could trace their roots back through the Roman Catholic church back to the early church that Paul and others would establish. Our celebration today of the Kirkin' of the Tartans is a way to remind us of our roots and to give thanks for them. So the first thing I would invite you to do today is to *thank God for our roots*.

The second thing I would invite you to do is to *take time to think about who welcomed you into the faith and, if possible, find some way to thank them*. If that person is still around, write them a note, call them on the phone, send them an email or text – or best of all tell them face to face. Back when I went to one of my college reunions, we met up with some old friends with whom I shared an apartment my third year. One of them was Rick, who is a successful dentist. When we started talking, he asked about the church and what I was doing. He told me about the church he belonged to now and how much it was a part of his Christian life. But then he stopped and said, “You know I am a Christian today because of you.” Now frankly, I did not remember that at all. In fact, in looking back to my college years, I can't remember being that much of a witness for Christ by what I said or did. But Rick reminded me of some conversations we had and he said that was when he became a follower of Christ. And I have to tell you, it really meant a lot to me to know that something I had said back then had been used by God in Rick's life. If you can, make the time to tell someone who welcomed you along your journey of faith. Please find time to do it. It will mean a lot to them and to you.

The third thing I would invite you to do in addition to thanking God for your spiritual roots and thanking the person or persons who welcomed you, would be this: *find a way to welcome others*. Learn from the example of Ananias who welcomed Paul. Open your eyes on Sunday morning or some other time to see those folks who may just need a word of welcome, a handshake, or simply someone to notice they exist. Get out of your “comfort zone” and, as one pastor says, “Just walk across the room” to speak to someone. (Bill Hybels) Ask God to help you to discern those persons each day to whom God wants you to extend a word of welcome.

Back around Easter, on a Friday morning, some of our preschool teachers noticed a woman wandering around our parking lot holding a black garbage bag filled with something. They weren't sure exactly what to do so they found Barbara Maples who sits at our Welcome Desk each day. Barbara is a retired ESOL teacher, which proved very helpful because the woman turned out to be Cambodian and she spoke very little English, but some Mandarin. Barbara, as an ESOL teacher, had had to learn a little Mandarin. So she began trying to talk with her. Barbara also told me later that all this time she was praying to herself, “Help me, God. Show me what to do.” The woman was about 23. She seemed to be rambling as she walked around the campus. Barbara just calmly walked with her, trying to build trust, while figuring out who she was and what her story might be. Barbara asked if she had some kind of ID or wallet – she had no ID, but she had 67 cents which she tried to give to Barbara. Over time Barbara found out her name, “Wong” and that she had come in a cab after she had run away from a difficult family situation.

At one point they happened to walk by the cross out in front of the church. The woman walked over to the cross and began stroking it. She asked Barbara, “This place is pray?” Barbara said that this was a place to pray. The woman then asked, “You pray to cross?” Barbara said, “No, we pray to Jesus who died on the cross because he loves us.” She then asked Barbara, “You pray with me?” And Barbara

did. She then asked Barbara, "You believe?" And Barbara said, "O yes!" Barbara said that they stood there by the cross for five or ten minutes in complete silence. Barbara said it was a very holy time in which she almost felt like she should be on the ground face down.

Over time Barbara was able to find out her name and where her family worked. Barbara called the police who came and were very kind and helpful, but said they could not take her to a shelter without an ID or a Visa. They talked to the woman who said she wanted to go to the hotel down the street, so Barbara called and made arrangements by talking with the manager who graciously said she would help. The manager's daughter happened to be taking a class in Mandarin and was able to facilitate communication over a cell phone. They fed her, and with money from the folks here at the church, Wong was finally able to take a taxi back home.

Barbara said the encounter affected her for days – it still does to this day. She wondered why she should be the one to do this. She said she felt totally inadequate to do this, but that over time she realized how God was in all of this. And now she says that she looks back and feels grateful that God would choose her to show welcome to someone who needed it.

Friends, that's one of the reasons why this church exists – to welcome others in the name of Christ. So remember who welcomed you, and find how God is inviting you to welcome others in the name of Christ. It will mean the world to someone else and it will remind you what we were all put here to do in the first place.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.