

The Measure of Welcome
Reading from the Old Testament: Leviticus 19:34
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 10:40-42

Did you win the Presidential Physical Fitness Award back in elementary school? I don't remember that I ever did. And despite a childhood passion for playing and competing in sports, I don't remember being that fond of taking the President's Physical Fitness Test in gym class. I was definitely not thrilled about taking the test in front of my leering audience of classmates. It was like hitting a driver on the first tee at a pro-am with the gallery being filled by your drunk frat brothers. Taking a physical fitness test in front of your fellow third graders would be as delightful as getting a physical in front of your fellow third graders. Sit-ups, pull-ups (or for the girls' the flexed arm hang; I was always envious of that difference), the shuttle run, the softball throw, the fifty-yard dash, the standing broad jump, and the distance run (back in the day, I think it was 600 yards).

It is ironic that I, along with everyone else, dreaded the 600-yard run the most. I don't know if I ever hit the standard, but at the age of 48 I ran a half-marathon at a quicker pace than was required for that 600-

yard run which seemed so unconscionably unreasonable and torturous in 1971.

Along with the PSAT and the classroom spelling bee, it came at an age where any revelation about how you measured up in the eyes of your peers held the potential of significant emotional trauma.

How do you measure up? We live in a society obsessed with measurements. Data analytics is the hot career track. If the Major Leaguers actually make it to the diamond this summer, sportswriters will need a PhD in statistical analysis to interpret even a portion of the measurements that drive the game of baseball today. Sure, you know about batting averages, strikeouts, home runs, and stolen bases; but are you up to speed on OBP, SLG, GDP, WPA, and the new darling of stat nerds, the WAR average! Sounds ominous doesn't it. WAR - Wins Against Replacement, i.e. A single number that represents the number of wins a player added to a team above what a replacement player would add. So, if your team is playing below .500, you're hoping your potential replacement would be Daffy Duck.

In the National Football League's annual combine, they even measure the hand size of the kickers. Chew on that for minute or two. They measure the hands of the kickers. Of course, humans measuring themselves against other humans seems innate, going on since the first art competition in cave dwellings. The moment we meet someone new, or just see a stranger in public view, the measuring begins. The question I have, and the question I think the text puts before us is not **that** we measure but **to what end** do we measure? Is it to distinguish ourselves from others, or place a value on others, or label others, exclude others? ... Or ... Do we use the skills associated with measuring not to **judge** the value of others but to **see** the value in others through the lens of Christ? Are we seeking power/advantage over them or kinship and friendship with them?

It can mean the difference between exclusion and hospitality, between condescension and welcome.

Siobahn Garrigan is a professor of religion at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. A former colleague of hers shares her recollection of a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland. Researching a book on the peace process, she visited said church and was pleased to be greeted at

the door by two women who were seemingly inviting her into conversation. Yes! I thought - good ushers doing what ushers are supposed to do! However, Professor Garrigan quickly realized she wasn't being welcomed, but rather, was being interviewed, i.e. interrogated. They quietly asked her name before ushering her in. Subsequently and similarly, they asked the first names of any other obvious visitors as they came to the door. Yet, Siobahn noticed that if the visitor had a name that would typically be Catholic, like Maria, Catherine, and Patrick, they were told that they had surely arrived at the wrong church and sent on their way. (William Goettler, *Feasting on the Word*)

Given the Troubles, as they were called in Northern Ireland in the last Century, troubles which were characterized by persistent violence and hate between Catholics and Protestants, one wouldn't be surprised by such a practice, maybe disturbed or disappointed, but not surprised, particularly if this had transpired in the 1960s or 70s. However, this was in the last ten years.

Now, our reflex is to quickly distance ourselves from such practices, noting that we are talking about a land far away with two different cultures and a centuries old history of animosity. Similar

interrogations and patently inhospitable attitudes certainly wouldn't occur in our neighborhood.

Well ... it could be unconscious, or at least more subtle, but it can happen as easily here as it does in every church regardless of size, style, heritage, theology, or demographic. Call it *taking the measure of someone* or *name that tribe* or *sizing up the competition* or just *small talk*, but we are innately and continuously evaluating others to see whether there is something to build upon, something to stay away from, something to benefit from, something to patronize, or some recognizable affinity that would prompt further interaction.

We all do it. Sometimes, we're not even aware that we're doing it. But you probably have known what it's like to be on the other side of the measuring stick. Have you ever been at a social occasion where you were dropped mid-sentence like a bruised peach in the produce aisle? "Hey there. Where you from?" Mexico, MO. "Huh, huh, huh, Okaay ... You work around here?" Uh, yes. I'm the pastor over at... "Hey Janet, come here and give me an elbow bump. Tell me about your trip to Croatia ... If you'll excuse me ..."

Secret handshakes, code words, litmus tests, resume victories, names dropped. Just going to a wedding reception can make you feel like Rusty the dog in the classic Far Side Cartoon, dodging cars and scrambling across a six-lane interstate. "Rusty's in the club!"

Mind you, there is nothing wrong inquiring, discerning, sounding out when you meet someone. The question, again, is to what end? Are you asking questions to understand, to learn, to appreciate and value and respect? Or, are your inquiries intent on judging, sorting, labeling? While Jesus calls us to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves in this world, our more fundamental calling is hospitality, welcome, inclusion. For such is the love of Christ.

Six times. Six times, the word welcome appears in our text today. You don't have to go to seminary to know that if a word is used six times in three verses, the author/speaker is trying to get an important point across. Δεχομαι - welcome or receive. Jesus states it plainly and timelessly, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Gosh, I wonder what Jesus could be saying to us in these inhospitable, anger driven, finger-pointing, dog-whistling, culture warring, tribalizing days?

Remember, from our readings over the last couple of weeks, Jesus has been commissioning his "apostles" to go forth into the world with his teaching and the gospel's good news. And Jesus has taken pains not to sugarcoat what they will experience in the pursuit of his mission for them.

"What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul ... "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword ... and one's foes will be members of one's own household ... whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

Into a perilous, often dangerous world they are sent, and it will not always go well for them, but what is it they are looking for in their effort to spread the good news? They're looking for people who do hospitality, who know welcome. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Jesus is still looking for it, and I believe the living Christ sees the potential in you. I know it. I've experienced from you. Whitney? Zach?

You're not in relation with SMPC because you've measured up or passed a litmus test, or possess a killer wardrobe, or have an impressive contact list? I know that. You know how I know that? You know how I know that? Because I have none of those things and you've let me hang around here for almost 16 years. Collectively, you possess a gift for hospitality that is so desperately needed today, desperately needed from us, because, let me tell you, there are a whole lot of places called church where welcome is the last word you would associate with them.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." That's why we're here, to be the welcome that can be so scarce out there.

To be the welcome of Christ. I think we're pretty good at it, but we can always be better. Yes, we should be engaging people, asking them to tell us their story, not for the purpose of labeling, cataloguing, demarcating, or patronizing. We ask the questions and we listen for the story, not with presumption and certainly not to judge, but to value, appreciate, connect. include, and dignify. For such is the Spirit of Christ.

Austin Channing Brown is an author of note, a frequent guest for interviews, podcasts, and panel discussions. The book? *I'm Still Here*.

Austin Channing Brown is a black woman, which is not what people expect upon hearing the name, and there is a reason for that.

She, herself, came to understand it more fully when she was about 7-years-old. At that age Austin already had a voracious appetite for books, sometimes not able to keep track of how many she had checked out. One day at the library she went to the desk with her latest stack and presented her library card. The librarian gave her the look, you know that look of suspicion you get when you're about to get in trouble? The librarian asked with dubious eyes, "Is this your library card?" Yes. Not believing it, the librarian asked again, "Are you sure? The card says Austin." Yes, that is my card. "Are you **sure** this is **your** library card?" Yes. Unimpressed, the librarian asked again

Yes. My name is Austin and that is my library card. The librarian muttered something about unusual names, finally stamped the books, and Austin went over to her mother and demanded to know why they had given Austin her name. Her mother said Austin was her

grandmother's maiden name, and Austin was carrying on the family name.

Persistent, Austin demanded, "I know how you came up with my name, but why did you choose it?" It was here that Austin learned the other half of the story about her name. Her mother said, "We knew that anyone who saw it before meeting you would assume you are a white man. One day you will have to apply for jobs. We just wanted to make sure you could make it to the interview." (Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here*)

7-years-old. To be 7-years-old, already having learned the lesson that for the rest of her life, hospitality could only be a muted, partial experience for her. Imagine a mom having to tell her 7-year-old that. It shouldn't be that way, and we know it. Seek to be cognizant of the barriers, the lines, the obstacles we put up, sometimes without knowing we've done it. Own up to it when we miss the mark. I believe deconstructing those barriers is a fundamental mission for Christ's church today, because there are so many places where prayers are said and hymns are sung and welcome remains elusive.

You know that surge of energy and adrenaline that whelms you when you realize someone is listening, paying attention, wanting to truly know about you, not to judge or label, but to appreciate you, value you, receive you? Be that for someone - today, tomorrow, and every day.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." That's our job.

Yesterday, we had a small wedding here. Wonderful young couple. Both raised in homes with lots of love. The mothers of the pair read the Scripture texts the couple had selected. I certainly wasn't surprised when the message of the text, read by the mother of the groom, Jane Klecker, culminated with these words, "Practice hospitality," because the Klecker home is well known to be a place of great hospitality.

Following the wedding, I went back to my office and learned that the mother of one of our members had died, succumbing to the effects of Covid-19. When I called her son, Kyle Smith, who with his wife Jen, chairs our Missions/Outreach Committee, do you know the first thing he said about his mom? "She had such a way of always making everyone feel so welcome." That's our job, folks. That's our job. Always

remember with every interaction with someone, you have the opportunity to welcome Christ. Amen.