

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 29, 2008

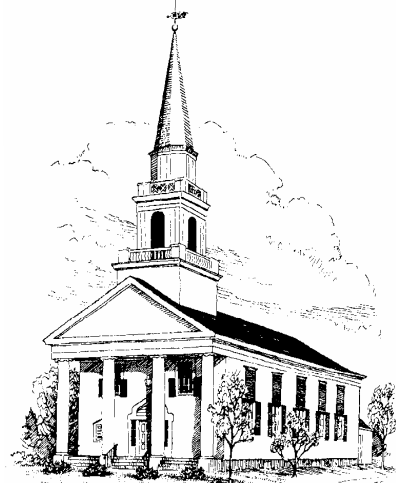
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“As Simple As a Cup of Water”

Scriptures:

Psalm 13

Matthew 10:40-42



Can you recall a time when you were a stranger or a visitor in a new place? Maybe newly moved to town? Maybe your first time at a church, your first day at a new school as a student or grad-student? Maybe the first time you walked into a new doctor’s or dentist’s office? If can you recall such a time, when you *were* the outsider, what do you remember about what happened? How did it feel?

And what made you feel truly welcome and warmly received? Was it the smile on the person at the front desk? Was it the warm handshake or the word of greeting that made you feel welcome? Was it the eye-to-eye contact of someone who said just the “right” thing at the right moment?

Most of us can remember vividly the times when the welcome we received was warm and friendly and we felt extravagantly welcome. I can recall my first visit to a new church in Ridgefield, Connecticut, some nearly 27 years ago now just after my family had moved back to Connecticut from Georgia. It was our first Sunday there. We didn’t know a soul and the welcome occurred even before we got to any door at all! Someone saw us in the parking lot with a toddler in hand, and she came across that lot to greet us and to ask if we would we like to see the childcare rooms before we went into church. Wow! We were impressed! And did we feel welcomed!

The importance of feeling welcomed plays a truly huge role in our lives no matter what setting we are talking about. If we feel we have been greeted well, if we feel we have been well “met”, if our first impression is a good one, we are apt to return. We are apt to go back to a place to eat where we’ve received a warm welcome. We return to a doctor’s office where they treat us well. We return to name-brand hotels and stores because we remember how we were treated there.

Choosing a church or finding a church community where we feel truly welcome is no different. What happens in those first 3 minutes at any new location is critical—critical to whether we decide we fell welcome or not, critical to whether we decide to return again or not. We all know about how critical hospitality is and especially those first 3 minutes are critical in terms of whether we ever return and whether we even stay on for the meal or the event. Hospi-

tality plays a particularly important role in our witness as Christians and today's text invites us to consider how we offer hospitality even to the strangers and visitors who come here to Mystic Congregational Church. Yes, hospitality is important and, yes, sometimes we forget just how important!

Strangers and visitors come and go here at our Mystic church. Visitors and guests come into our sanctuary for a Sunday morning service or for a Saturday night service. We don't know them and they don't know us. We aren't sure whether we ought to know them. We feel awkward approaching them. We feel awkward and uncomfortable reaching out and talking to folks we don't know especially if they may have been a member here for a long while and we simply don't know them. We feel uncomfortable and the visitor or guest senses that tension.

Hospitality does seem to come naturally for some people. Some among us seem to have a knack for sensing the needs of others—ready to get a glass of water, give directions, or just listen. Sometimes it isn't doing something as much as our presence that matters. I bet each of us can remember a time when someone just stayed with us, not saying much yet being present through a difficult time. There are some among us for whom being hospitable is just easy. But not for all of us. Many of us feel hesitant to reach out and greet someone we don't know.

Our text today reminds us that whoever welcomes us also welcomes Jesus and the one who sent Jesus: God. Jesus establishes a four-way partnership in this scripture—a 4-way partnership among God, Jesus, the disciple, and the stranger (or host). *God* initiated the partnership by sending Jesus. *Jesus* then sends us, the disciples, out into the world. Then we, the *disciples*, make the final connection by reaching out to others or by being welcomed by others, depending on the situation. This is a 4-way covenant. God, Jesus, the disciple, and the stranger or host.

We all need reminders occasionally that we are all linked and we know that this linkage involves risk and some liability on our part. One pastor has said: *If only God's grace weren't so scary, if only it didn't come with so much risk! Extending the circle to another involves the risk of rejection, the risk of laughter, of tears, of love. (William Willimon)*

There's been a lot of talk this year about unity here at Mystic Congregational Church. Most churches yearn for a sense of unity. That's not too surprising. If we yearn for unity that means strict conformity, total agreement, or cohesiveness, then we will always be disappointed for it's rare that this congregation or most congregations will always see things eye to eye. What unity "*does* call for is empathy: thinking and feeling from another person's perspective; it requires *tolerant altruism*," one observer has said. (*Stroop*)

Clearly the early church also had people just like all of us—people who were either quite comfortable offering hospitality and also people who are uncomfortable in that role. Yet the only way the early church grew and grew was because folks welcomed the stranger and the visitor. Frankly, the only way any church grows and grows is by welcoming the stranger and the visitor because it is those who were once strangers and visitors that become the future church, the ongoing church after us.

Last week a group of us attended worship at the First Hispanic Baptist Church of New

London, one of our partner churches. Partway through the service, there came a time for welcoming and we were invited to stand and greet one another. This is called the *passing of the peace* in some traditions and, in others, it's simply the greeting time. At last week's service in New London we stood up and moved out of our pews and most everyone who was able moved up and down the aisles for a good ten minutes and everybody was hugging and kissing and shaking hands and extending words of greeting including: *God bless you! The peace of Christ! Welcome to worship! We're glad you are here!* Now that was a warm and welcoming ten minutes. That was a moment of genuine hospitality. We were mostly total strangers to the members of this congregation yet we were genuinely welcomed into their midst.

I know we New Englanders are sometimes typecast as reserved and resistant to making any fuss over greetings and welcomes. A few Sundays back, when the children led us in worship, we were invited to be seated while the children came around and greeted us in our pews. A few persons said after that service how important it was to be greeted that Sunday. Having someone make an effort to reach out and greet us makes a difference.

What does it take to be hospitable? Why do we want to pay attention to being hospitable in this church? There's a Shaker greeting that I read this week which goes "*The Christ in me greets the Christ in thee and draws us together in love.*"

Whatever we do and whatever we say, all these things represent God and Jesus. That's what Jesus tells us in today's lesson. Our actions like loving and caring for others, our inclusiveness and welcoming process matters. Let's become aware this week that each of us is an ambassador for Christ. Each of us can be more open to the needs of strangers. Each of us can even offer something as simple as a drink of water to a stranger and it will make a difference. Amen.

