

“So Many Strangers”

Mark 6:30-44

Sermon series: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Today’s answer: Jesus, the one who welcomes

October 6, 2019

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

\*\*\*\*\*

A number of years ago, back when we lived in Dallas, I was out walking our dog. As I passed a house that was 2 doors down from ours, an elderly man—the man who owned the house—he was at his front door, and he called out, “Hey—do you know anyone with a power saw?”

I wasn’t sure I heard him right.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you have a power saw? Do you know if anyone around here has one?”

“Sorry, I don’t...”

and our dog was tugging on the leash so I started to go...

but then I thought—what in the world does this old guy

want a power saw for?

So I asked him.

“I’ve got a tree limb that broke off,” he said. “It’s not all the way off, but it’s resting on a power line.”

Good grief! This guy wants to use a power saw to cut off a broken tree limb on a power line??!

“You need to call the power company,” I shouted back.

“Oh...ok,” he said. And he went back inside.

After the walk, I went over to the man’s house, knocked on his door.

Did you call the power company?

Yes, they said they’d come today, don’t know when. Say, can you open the gate for me? I’m not getting around too good, and I want to make sure it’s unlocked when they come...

Well, sure—I went to the gate, it was locked, went back to the man, asked for the key, went back to the gate, unlocked the gate...but his sprinklers had been on, and it was muddy by the gate, so walking through his house to give him back his key I got mud all over his floor...so I should clean it up, and I asked him where he kept his paper towels, he told me, I went, and he was out of paper towels...

You're out of paper towels, I said.

So he found me some napkins, and I cleaned up the mud, then I asked if I could check out the branch—sure enough it was on a power line, but it was also leaning into the neighbor's yard.

I went over to the neighbor, told the neighbor, she said she'd call the power company too. The whole thing took about half an hour, and while I didn't tell him this, the episode was kind of embarrassing to me.

See, we had lived two houses away from him for 2 years.

I first met him when another neighbor invited us all over to her place for dinner, but after that dinner, I never made an effort to get to know him. I knew he was recently divorced, that's why he moved into the neighborhood.

Why didn't I do anything else to get to know him?

I know why.

I was busy, right?

Had two young boys at the time, new congregation in Dallas to care for, things to do...just busy, busy, too busy for this neighbor who was a stranger.

So I think I know what the disciples were feeling, on that day long ago, the day described in our text.

Life with Jesus is busy, busy, busy.

"...they had no leisure even to eat."

That's how Mark puts it in our text for today.

So Jesus says to his disciples "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

In other words, catch your breath.  
Spend some time with me, says Jesus.

Mark writes, “And they went away...to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.”

If you were one of the disciples at that moment, and you were hoping to spend some quality time with Jesus, away from the hustle, just you and Jesus...and you see the crowds—what would you hope that Jesus would say to those strangers at that moment?

I know what I would've hoped to hear from Jesus:

Sorry, everyone, we're closed for the weekend.  
Go back to your homes, we'll answer email on Monday, see you next week.

But Jesus did NOT say that.

Jesus had compassion for this crowd of strangers,  
and Jesus WELCOMED this crowd of strangers.

Our subject this morning is WELCOME...Jesus, the one who welcomes.

It seems like such an easy thing to do...  
Is it always an easy thing to do?

At the beginning of worship today, I asked you to sign in on the friendship pad, so that after worship is over, you could greet by name anyone who is sitting in your pew.

Is that something you're planning to do?

Maybe you remember earlier this year when I asked everyone to set a goal of meeting five new people in our church....do you remember that?

Some of you not only remember it.  
Some of you did it.

You reported back to me that you met your five new people the very day that I asked you to do it.

So...what would happen if you took the next step?

What would happen if you didn't just meet them—  
but you opened your home to welcome them?

And you did the work of getting to know them?

Five new people or families by Christmas?  
That's not enough time, right?  
How about by Easter?

People who are members of your church but at this moment they are still strangers to you—and by Easter, they will no longer be strangers because you will have invited them to your house for a meal...

Is that something you could do?  
Or am I taking the WELCOMING stuff just a bit too far?

See, one of the most consistent complaints that Jesus received in his ministry was that he was taking this welcoming stuff just a bit too far.

Do you recall the parable of the prodigal son?

I bet everyone here remembers that story...wonderful story of a father who welcomes his rebellious younger son back home.

What's not remembered as well is why Jesus told that story.

Luke 15:

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Jesus—you're taking this welcoming stuff a bit too far!

So Jesus told them a parable...

Or how about in our text for today, when the disciples try to get Jesus to send the crowd away.

They've got a good point.  
Not enough food.

Wait, you want US to give them something to eat?  
Jesus—you're taking this welcoming stuff a bit too far.

Have you ever thought it?  
How far is too far when it comes to WELCOME?

The pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber tells the story of Larry.

Bolz-Weber used to be the pastor of a church in Denver.

Larry showed up one day.  
Larry was a new visitor at Nadia's church.  
Larry wanted to have coffee with Nadia.  
He was excited to meet with Nadia and to become a member of Nadia's church.

The only problem, Nadia says, is that the feeling was NOT mutual.

"Larry had cornered me the Sunday before," she writes, "his first time visiting the church. He had grabbed my arm, his glassy eyes looking for an uncomfortably long time into mine" as he talked about how much he loved her sermon.

After they met for coffee, Nadia's opinion of Larry didn't change.

"I just didn't like him," she says.

"So I kept Larry at arm's length, never doing much to try to connect with him, never bothering to help him get connected."

Then something awful happened.  
Larry fell ill very suddenly, and died.

And then Nadia felt awful.  
Not just because she never tried to connect with Larry.  
She felt awful because, as Larry's pastor, she had once tried to EXCLUDE  
Larry from church.

"I'd purposely left Larry's address off a mass e-mail I sent out, reminding  
people to register for the spring retreat. Seriously. Who does a thing like that?"

Shortly after Larry's funeral, a woman approached and said, "You're Nadia,  
right?"

It was a friend of Larry's.

"I wanted to thank you for having a church where Larry felt so welcome.  
He spoke so highly of you and your congregation, and I know that having you as  
his pastor meant a lot for him in his final months."

Nadia Bolz-Weber says she felt about this big.  
She writes:

"Sometimes God needs stuff done, even though I can be a real [schmuck].  
There is absolutely no justice in the fact that Larry loved me and that church."

But she goes on to say that it wasn't just Larry who received God's grace  
through their relationship...it was her.

She received God's grace from him.<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

To which the Gospel writer Mark would say...EXACTLY.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York: Convergent Books, 2015.

According to Mark, God shows up when we welcome to the stranger, if when we don't feel like it, even when we've got reasonable reasons not to do it.

Just look at our text.

Where does God's grace show up in our text?

When Jesus blesses the meal, and it multiplies, right?

It's an act of God, a miracle of God, God's grace.

Yes...but that's not the first miracle in this story, according to Mark.

Did you catch the first miracle in this text?

In verse 31, Jesus invites the disciples to come away to a deserted place.

And in verse 32, Mark tells us that's where the disciples went—to a deserted place.

And then in verse 35, the disciples remind Jesus (just in case he's forgotten) that the place where they are is a what?

A deserted place.

Mark repeat that phrase three times.

In the Greek, the word is "aramon".

It means desert.

It means wilderness.

It means barren.

It means there's nothing there.

Now...listen to verse 39 one more time:

"Then he [Jesus] ordered them [the disciples] to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass."<sup>2</sup>

What green grass?

Mark just told us 3 times that they were in the aramon.

Was there a sprinkler system in the desert back in Jesus' day?

Green grass...in the aramon?

---

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Tom Long for pointing out this detail in Mark's telling of the feeding of the five thousand.

Friends, that's not an ancient irrigation system at work.  
That's God at work.

When the disciples, however grudgingly, go along with Jesus and start do their best to welcome all these strangers—all of a sudden, there's green grass growing in the desert.

Something good that wasn't supposed to grow...

Let me get at it this way.

A few weeks ago, our family got a new dog, a puppy that's now about 2 ½, close to 3 months old.

I had forgotten what it was like to have a puppy.  
Takes some adjustments, right?  
The chewing, the accidents, the training, the energy...good God, the energy.

But even though I may not always show it, I am growing to love our new dog in just the three short weeks that we've had her.

Which means I've come a long way.  
See, I didn't grow up with dogs, and I have a vivid memory of the FIRST time I got a dog.

This was 20 years ago, in my late 20s, before I was married.  
I was living on my own in Dallas, I thought it would be fun to own a dog.

Got her from a rescue agency, she was a 3-year-old golden retriever.

I was excited about my new pet, but upon arriving at my condo, we ran into some problems.

When I tried to get her to go up the steps, she resisted.  
I pulled, she resisted.  
I pulled, she got out of her leash and ran away.



Once I got her inside, she started barking—like she needed to go out. She had just been outside, there was no reason to take her out again. So now I resisted...and she proceeded to GO all over my kitchen floor.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but my first time with a dog—I could never get the hang of it.

I lasted all of one week with my first dog before I decided to give her back to the rescue agency. The woman who came to pick her up—she was kind of disappointed with me, I could tell, because she suggested that next time I get a pet, maybe I should try a goldfish.

\*\*\*\*\*

Why do I share that with you?

Because we're not talking today about pets and puppies.  
We're talking about people.

And when we welcome the stranger, and we learn that they aren't like us, and they see the world differently than us, but we welcome them again, and we do it again, and it doesn't go like we had planned, but we hold it together and we give whatever love we can to people we really are not inclined to love...

You know what God does with that love?

God multiplies it...by the hundreds...by the thousands....

(Amen.)