

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 21, 2020 (Proper 8, Year A)  
Matthew 10:40-42

In his *Old Scout* column in the newspapers some years ago (June 22, 2008), Garrison Keillor wrote this:

“Stories are common currency in life, but only to people on foot. Nobody ever told a story to a clerk at a drive-up window, but you can walk up to the lady at the check-out counter and make small talk and she might tell you, as a woman told me the other day as she rang up my groceries, that she had gotten a puppy that day to replace the old dog who had to be put down a month ago, and right there was a little exchange of humanity. Her willingness to TELL me that made her REAL to me. People who AREN'T real to each other are DANGEROUS to each other. Stories give us the simple empathy that is the basis of the Golden Rule, which is the basis of civilized SOCIETY.”

I'm reminded of Jesus words, “Whoever WELCOMES a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a RIGHTEOUS person in the NAME of a righteous person will receive the REWARD of the righteous.” Garrison Keillor and that store clerk WELCOMED each other. They accepted each other EXACTLY as they were. They made the choice to be REAL, and to LET the OTHER person be genuine with THEM. “And right THERE was a little exchange of humanity.”

Welcoming a person means opening your heart, and being willing to listen to their story, and honoring their gifts and their presence. This isn't only the basis of civilized society, as Keillor put it; it's the basis of Christian life. Even when society gets UNCIVILIZED, Christians are called by God to be REAL.

And Keillor hit the nail right on the head: “People who AREN'T REAL to each other are DANGEROUS to each other.”

We've SEEN that, haven't we? When we lump people into a category and assume we know all ABOUT them, we aren't being REAL to each other. When we consider ALL BLACK people DANGEROUS simply by the color of their skin, we miss the distinctiveness of each ONE, and the TRUTH about the vast MAJORITY that are just trying to get BY each day, like ALL of us. And when we call ALL cops BAD cops and RACIST, we're missing the Christ that LIVES in each individual – some right there on the surface, and some BURIED under years of pain, but THERE nonetheless. If we AREN'T WILLING to consider EACH person's story, if we aren't willing to LISTEN, then we aren't being REAL to each other, and “people who AREN'T REAL to each other are DANGEROUS to each other.”

Recently I was sent this story. The author wrote:

I saw him in the church building for the FIRST time on Wednesday. He was in his mid-70's with thinning silver hair and a neat brown suit. Many times in the past I had invited him to come. Several other Christian friends had talked to him about the Lord and had tried to share the good news with him.

He was well respected, honest, a man of good character. He acted much like a CHRISTIAN would act, but he never came to church or professed Christ. After I had got to KNOW him well and we had talked about a wide range of subjects, I had asked him if he had ever BEEN to a church service.

He hesitated. Then with a twisted grimace he told me of an experience he had as a boy. He was raised in a large family. His parents survived the depression but they struggled to provide food and clothing for the family. When he was around ten years old a friend invited him to go to church with HIS family. He went. The Sunday school class was great. The songs were

fun to sing and the stories, oh, the GREAT Bible stories, were exciting to hear. He had never heard ANYONE read from the Bible BEFORE.

But as class ended, the teacher pulled him aside and said, "Son, please don't come again dressed as you are now. We want to look our best when we come into God's house."

He looked down at his old hand-me-down overalls that were worn and tattered. He thought about that for a moment and said softly, "No ma'am, I won't ever."

Then, the now OLD man looked at me and said, "And you know what? I NEVER did." It was CLEAR that he was DONE with that conversation.

The author reflected, "I'm sure that the Sunday school teacher MEANT WELL, and in fact expressed the feeling of the MAJORITY of the folks in that church. But WHAT IF, what if INSTEAD she had put her arms AROUND the dirty little boy in the ragged overalls and said, 'Son, I'm THRILLED that you came this morning, and I hope you will come every CHANCE you get to hear MORE about Jesus, because he loves you so much'? What's more, what if she would have talked with her pastor or her friends in the church and mobilized a full-blown effort to HELP his family?

"What if that church would have thought, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Or whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these LITTLE ones will receive a great reward'"? (v. 40 & 42)

The author concluded: "Yes, I saw him in the church house for the FIRST time on Wednesday, and I cried as I looked at the immaculately dressed old gentleman – lying there in his casket. He was looking his best. But all I could think of were those words of an impressionable ten-year-old boy echoing in my mind, 'No ma'am, I won't EVER.'"

"People who AREN'T real to each other are DANGEROUS to each other." But let's CONTRAST that with ANOTHER little boy's story.

Fred Craddock tells of the time he and his wife slipped away to the mountains for a few days of relaxation. As they sat in a little restaurant, they saw a man going from table to table GREETING diners. Eventually he made his way to the Craddock's table and, learning that Fred was a minister, he INSISTED on telling them his story.

The man said he had been born just a few miles from that spot, across the mountain. His mother had not been MARRIED when he was born, and the criticism directed at HER also hit HIM. His schoolmates learned from their parents how to RIDICULE, and the boy learned to stay to HIMSELF at lunch and recess, lest their insults strike too hard. Even MORE difficult were trips to town with his mother, when he could FEEL the looks and the shaking of heads, and he heard the question, "I wonder who his FATHER is?"

When he was about twelve, a new pastor came to the little community church. People talked about his skill as a preacher, and the boy began to go to hear for himself. He was fascinated by the preacher, but he was always careful to slip in late, sit in the back and leave early, lest someone catch him and ask, "What's a boy like YOU doing here?"

One Sunday, though, he was so caught up in the service that he FORGOT to slip out before it was over. Suddenly he felt a big hand on his shoulder, and as he turned around he saw the face of that preacher. The preacher said, "Who are you, son? Whose BOY are you?" His young heart sank at the question, but then the preacher went ON: "Wait a minute. I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. YOU are a child of GOD!" And with that he patted the boy on the back and added, "Boy, that's quite an inheritance. Go and CLAIM it."

As the boy changed to manhood in that restaurant, the old man said to Fred and his wife, "That ONE statement LITERALLY changed my whole life." He explained that his name was Ben Hooper and he had TWICE been elected GOVERNOR of the state of Tennessee. His had been a successful and respected life, made POSSIBLE by a small-town minister, but REALLY, just a CHRISTIAN, who CARED enough to encourage ONE little boy.

Hear the words of the Lord: "Whoever welcomes YOU welcomes ME, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who SENT me... And whoever gives even a CUP of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, NONE of these will lose their REWARD."  
May it be so with YOU. Amen.