

Homily – Welcoming in Action

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Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Welcome.

“To greet hospitably and with courtesy or cordiality. To accept with pleasure the occurrence or presence.” Mirriam-Webster

I like that second part: “to accept with pleasure...”

This morning I am going to tell you about two special Americans who I think exemplify, in a very meaningful way, this second part. By that I mean, they used their unique gifts of word and deed to bring about welcoming to the marginalized in their context.

There is no doubt in my mind that they had a welcoming Spirit within them so that others welcomed their words and activism—the welcome of Christ within them shone brightly.

On Tuesday we will celebrate the 247th anniversary of the announcement of the separation of the 13 colonies from Great Britain known to us as The Declaration of Independence. It took a few more years for The Constitution of the United States of America to be written, ratified, and enacted.

Did you know, we live in a country that has the longest surviving written government charter in the world?

The Preamble of our Constitution sounds so welcoming. Our national hymns all sound so loving and welcoming—all exuding the ideal of freedom with over-arching love.

But I think it was, and still is, an ideal.

The ideals in that preamble and the guaranteed freedoms of the 1st amendment are a work in progress. “Promotion of the general welfare” and the blessings of liberty with freedom of religion and speech, (and more) **are** written there. Yet we are still striving to bring those words to life for **ALL** people.

Only 85 years after the Declaration our countrymen were fighting each other. Though claiming to be Christians, followers of Jesus, welcoming was apparently not on the agenda of everyone.

Then, 107 years after the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, in 1883, a young woman was commissioned to write a poem for a fund raiser to help with the cost of building a pedestal for a gift of friendship from the people of France. I imagine you all know what that gift was.

Emma Lazarus was a Jewish American born in New York City. Though her parents were also born in New York City, her ancestors had been immigrants as far back as the late 15th century.

It is not hard to imagine that she understood the rampant antisemitism of her time and felt deeply for the 2.8 million Jewish immigrants fleeing Eastern and Southern Europe in the late 19th century.

Emma identified strongly with her Jewish religion, but I think she would have known what Jesus meant by welcoming. After all, welcoming was an important part of the Jewish Law since the time of Moses.

From Leviticus 19:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Thinking about all those immigrants, she wrote the sonnet called “The New Colossus”, the last words of which are very familiar to us.

““Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she with silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”” WELCOME

Emma died at the early age of 38 but in her short life she was a prophet and an activist participating in the support of organizations assisting Jewish immigrants in New York.

Fast forward 200 years from the signing of the Declaration to a transgender African American woman who was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church.

Pauli Murray was as welcoming and as deeply concerned about the marginalized in her time as Emma was in hers. Like Emma, Pauli Murray was a writer and activist.

In her early life she became a civil rights lawyer representing and advocating not only regarding African American discrimination but also gender discrimination.

Pauli was a first in many other venues as well as being the first African American woman to be ordained priest in the Episcopal Church.

It is not hard to see that she embodied Jesus’s words to welcome. She died at the age of 75 leaving a wealth of love in her wake. Yesterday The Episcopal Church remembered her life and legacy on the Church Calendar of Saints.

These two women used their love for what God loves to welcome the stranger, to care for the marginalized and insecure, to bring to life those words on a page in the National Archives of the United States of America.

They gave the proverbial “cup of cold water” Jesus spoke of as they welcomed Christ in the way Jesus taught. I invite you to read Matthew 25 as a reminder.

There are many others we could name whose lives showed us the meaning of welcoming with pleasure.

Here, in the southern end of San Luis Obispo County we, too, will celebrate Independence Day with BBQs, family gatherings, games, and, in some places, fireworks.

As we do, let us also remember the importance of what happened 247 years ago—the freedom to love and welcome with pleasure was born in the Declaration of Independence.

Let us also remember that the promises of our Constitution are only promises on paper until we, each one of us, embody them in our lives as Emma and Pauli did.

We must each take these seriously and actively welcome with pleasure even those who are different as well as those who are most needy.

And, therefore, fulfilling that part of our Baptismal Covenant that says: *“to seek and serve Christ in all people, striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being”*.

For in doing so, we welcome Christ.