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*Welcome the Stranger*

Matthew 25:31-40; Matthew 5:14-15

I begin with a word of greeting and gratitude. When I left St. John's seventeen years ago to answer a call at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, I had mixed feelings. While I was ready to transition out youth ministry I was not ready to leave you--the people of St. John's. Here at St. John's I found a wonderful family; youth who were bright and creative and adults who were generous and faithful. As I have said so many times before, you graciously endured my mistakes as a young minister, you accepted my, sometimes, crazy ideas about theology and ministry, and you challenged me by calling out the best in me as a person and as a minister. In profound ways, the relationships I formed here shaped not only my ministry they also shaped who I am as a person of faith. Leaving St. John's was difficult for me. So, when I arrived at Pullen, it was a wonderful surprise to discover that there were many connections between the people of St. John's and the people of Pullen. In those connections, I found great comfort. So, I bring greetings to you from your friends at Pullen; and I stand before you today with a heart full of gratitude for the years in which I had the privilege to share a portion of the journey with you. It is from that place of gratitude that I offer the following reflections.

*"We will be a servant church, recognizing the infinite worth of every person and believing that Christ has called us to active involvement in behalf of human brotherhood."* So states the covenant of St. John's Baptist Church. Listen again. *We will be a servant church*—a church that doesn't seek power but shares power. *We will recognize the infinite worth of every single person*—black, white, Hispanic; rich, poor; gay, straight, trans-gendered; educated, uneducated; Republican, Democrat; liberal, conservative; young and old. *We believe that Christ*—the one who redeems us through grace, who loves us unconditionally, who gave his very life for our freedom—*calls us to active involvement*—to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to visit the prisoner and the sick, to clothe the naked and to welcome the stranger—*in behalf of human brotherhood and sisterhood*. It is the core of your covenant and it is the heart of the gospel of Matthew.

The mandate in Matthew 25 is clear. What counts for a life of faith is whether one has acted with loving care for people in need. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner and the sick, welcoming the stranger are not a matter of "extra credit," but rather constitute the decisive criteria for being "people of faith." Jesus taught over and over that self-giving care for others is the heart of God's word revealed in the Torah. But as a good Jewish rabbi, he not only taught this truth, he demonstrated it by the way he lived his life. And now, scripture teaches us that when we care for those in need—when we respond to the least of these, the hungry, the unloved, the one who looks different; all of whom Jesus says are members of his family—it is then that we have responded to the living Christ.

You know, sometimes it seems that the institutional church is more focused on trying to define who is a part of God's family and who is not, that we miss being about the very work to which we have been called as the church— that is, to recognize the infinite worth of every person and to be actively involved in the world on behalf of humanity, caring for the least among us. Jesus doesn't say that some are included in his family and others are not. There is no list of characteristics

that qualifies or disqualifies a person from sitting at Jesus' table. He does say, however, that those whom we might think are not included are indeed the very ones who are: those who don't look like us or act like us or think like us or smell like us or dress like us or frequent the same places we do. No, Jesus says that all are welcome around his table—you and me and the guy and gal next door who may have tattoos covering their entire body. Yes, all are welcome. I wonder sometimes why that is so hard for us to understand. Why we can't believe or imagine that Jesus came into this world and gave of himself for every single person. And why we are so focused on sorting out who's in and who's not. I suppose we have a hard time because we are inclined to listen to our fears instead of our love; to place judgment instead of offering acceptance; to self-protect instead of risking being vulnerable. I get how hard it is sometimes to welcome the stranger. God knows it hard enough sometimes to welcome those we know, much less a stranger. There is a part of me that wonders if the reason we have such a hard time welcoming the stranger among us is because we have such a hard time welcoming the stranger within us—those places in our own lives and souls that we would rather keep hidden. The part of us that is hungry—hungry for acceptance and love; the part of us that is thirsty—thirsty for purpose and meaning in life that so often eludes us; the parts of us that are imprisoned within our own souls—thoughts of not being good enough or having enough or successful enough or smart enough. Yes, we are all hungry and thirsty; we all have places where we feel trapped and locked in, where we feel sick of soul, and vulnerable. And yet, Jesus says to us—the ones who have enough food and water, who are free to come and go as we please, who have access to the best medical care there is, who can be estranged from what truly resides in the heart—you are welcome, too. It is ironic that the stranger is not only outside of us, some other. The stranger is within us as well. And maybe if we can learn how to welcome the stranger within, we will be able to more fully and graciously welcome the stranger among us. I wonder!

Some years ago, one Sunday morning, a church member came barreling in my office saying there was a situation in the church foyer that he needed my help with. He said there was a group of strangers in foyer asking about a Sunday school class. As I rounded the corner, I saw fifteen adults dressed in square-dancing outfits, each holding a bible. Now if you know anything about Pullen Church, you might be able to understand how usual it would look, to a Pullen member, to see fifteen adults each holding a bible and where the men's bible class meets and where the women's bible class meets. Sadly, it wasn't the outfits that caught us off guard that day. After a few moments I learned that this group was in town for the State Fair and that they had a performance that afternoon. Being Sunday, a day of worship, they had gotten in their van, headed up Hillsborough Street and stopped at the first Baptist church they came to—Pullen Memorial Baptist. Once I explained that we didn't have a men's class or a women's class, that all of our adult classes had men and women in them, they asked if there was a class that studied the bible. To that, I could say yes. Mentally, I was going through each of our adult classes trying quickly to discern which one might be less offensive to them. I settled on the Seeker's class taught by Suzanne Newton—a woman of great faith and deep respect for scripture. As I opened the classroom door and introduce the strangers, I thought Suzanne was going to faint. Graciously, she welcomed them in and continued her lesson. After church, Suzanne came to me and in all seriousness, said "I just want to say that Jesus joined us in Sunday school this morning." Not sure I fully understood her comment, I asked, "What do you mean?" She replied, "Jesus says when you welcome the stranger, you welcome him." She was right. Fifteen people—they looked different, they talked different, they had different ideas about the bible—and yet, they brought a presence into our church that morning that transcended any label that could have defined them as in or out of the Pullen family. That morning, maybe more than most Sunday's at Pullen, we welcomed the stranger among us and Christ's presence was with us. But I think something else happened that morning and it was this: we welcomed the stranger within

us—our fears of worshipping with others whose theology is different, our own vulnerability in facing how others see us, and those places where we are guilty of judging others instead of accepting them as they are. Jesus says, when you do it unto the least of these, you did it to me.

St. John's has a rich history of welcoming the stranger. The first three pastors of this church—Dr. Joseph Gaines, Dr. C.W. Durden, and Dr. Claude Broach—deeply understood what it meant to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit the prisoner and sick, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. For years, this church has been a light in this city—a light to those who are hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick, naked and a stranger—both physically and spiritually. Now, more than ever, our world needs your light. Our world needs you to continue to feed those who are hungry and thirsty, physically and spiritually. Our world need you to stand strong and firm in welcoming the stranger—the one whose skin might be a different color, the one who may love differently, the one who might think differently, the one who might speak differently, the one who is a stranger in a foreign land. The righteous asked, “When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?” And Jesus said, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.”

“We will be a servant church, recognizing the infinite worth of every person and believing that Christ has called us to active involvement in behalf of human brotherhood.” So states your covenant. Hold true to it—our world needs you to. Charlotte needs you to. Continue to be *a servant church*—a church that doesn't seek power but shares power. Continue your tradition of *recognizing the infinite worth of every single person*—black, white, Hispanic; rich, poor; gay, straight, transgendered; educated, uneducated; Republican, Democrat; liberal, conservative; young and old. Continue to *believe that Christ*—the one who redeems us through grace, who loves us unconditionally, who gave his very life for our freedom—*calls you to active involvement*—to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to visit the prisoner and the sick, to clothe the naked and to welcome the stranger—*in behalf of human brotherhood and sisterhood*. It is the core of who you have been, who you are, and who God is still calling you to be. And it is the heart of the gospel.

Bound together, you the people who are St. John's Baptist Church, are God's light in this world. In these days, and in the days to come, let your light shine bright on our weary world.

*(Sing)*

*Light dawns on a weary world when eyes begin to see all people's dignity. Light dawns on a weary world: the promised day of justice comes.*

*The trees shall clap their hands; the dry lands, gush with springs; the hills and mountains shall break forth with singing! We shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace, as all the world in wonder echoes Shalom.*

*Love grows in a weary world when hungry hearts find bread and children's dreams are fed. Love grows in a weary world: the promised day of plenty comes.*

May you go out in joy, be led forth in peace, and work daily for the promised day of justice.