

The lady of the house was giving last minute instructions to her butler before the start of a huge dinner being held at the estate: “Bentley,” she said, “I want you to stand at the front door and call the guests’ names as they arrive.” “Very well, madam,” replied the butler, “I’ve been wanting to do that for years.”

One of the occupational hazards of being a butler is that you have to be welcoming to people who aren’t particularly welcome-able. Actually, it isn’t just butlers who have that experience. Waiters and waitresses, for example, have to put up with patrons who aren’t always very pleasant or exactly welcome-able. Mormon missionaries and Jehovah’s Witnesses are, in contrast, usually polite and pleasant. Still, few of us are thrilled when they, or any evangelists, come knocking, as we hear in the following story:

Two church members were going door to door. They knocked on the door of a home where the woman who opened it was not happy to see them. She told them in no uncertain terms that she did not want to hear their message and slammed the door in their faces. To her surprise, however, the door did not close. In fact, it bounced back open. She tried slamming the door again, really putting her back into it. The result was the same — the door bounced back open. Convinced that the unwanted callers must be sticking a foot in the doorway, she reared back to give it a slam that would teach them a lesson, when one of them said, “Ma’am, before you do that again, you need to move your cat out of the way.”

While it is true that door-to-door salespeople are getting rarer and rarer these days, they do have modern descendants. Telemarketers, email marketing and surveys are some of the unwelcome curses of the digital age. Being welcoming and being welcome-able. As important as those characteristics are in sales, they are even more fundamental to what the kingdom of God is all about. Through Jesus Christ we get welcomed into the family of God; we are incorporated into — made a part of — what we could call “Welcome, Incorporated” or “Welcome, Inc.,” the Body of Christ. The baptismal font is the ritual welcoming place where God formally and publicly welcomes us and claims us as his own and begins making us into followers of Jesus Christ.

As baptised followers of Jesus, his mission becomes ours: to proclaim the good news that God is in the business of welcoming the lost, the outcast, the forgotten, the stranger, even the enemy. When that message is incorporated into our lives and we give flesh and blood to that message, we become both welcoming of and welcome-able by others because of and through the power of the good news we bear. We can be welcoming and welcome-able: because of the free gift of God: eternal life. Since the life God offers is a gift, we are not in competition with others for it, and because the life we are given in Christ is God’s, it is not a non-renewable commodity or resource that will eventually run out, like oil. Beyond that, its price will not go up on us tomorrow or ever, because it was paid once and for all on the cross by God’s own Son. Therefore, it is available to any and all who will receive it in faith.

But for that to happen, we who incorporate the message must be both welcoming and welcome-able, not just in words and theory but also in attitude and action. The Body of Christ — Welcome, Inc. — is to be full of open doors, open hearts, and open minds. Sometimes that is difficult for us because we are afraid; we see the world changing so much around us that we feel more and more like fish out of water. We begin to wonder if anyone will ever respond to the message we have to share. The good news for us is that in spite of the seriousness of discipleship as described in the verses immediately before the gospel reading for today, Jesus assures us some people will respond. Some people will respond. They will respond if they can see Jesus at work in and through us, being welcoming of even the smallest of gestures of reception from others.

Does that mean anything goes, that we should compromise on just about everything in order to get people in the doors and make them feel welcome? Do we just cover up the dirt and the hard things?

Well, that's not what Jeremiah, the prophet, did. He would not compromise on the truth of what God was saying when others were mouthing only what was politically correct at the time. (See Jeremiah 28:5-9.) He would not be a hypocrite and just cover up the dirt and tell people what they wanted to hear. Being incorporated into God's people does not mean business as usual. Being welcomed by God and becoming welcome-able to others results in changed lives.

The apostle Paul makes that clear in Romans 6. The most authentic witness to the good news of God's love occurs when, according to Paul, we present ourselves to God and no longer continue to habitually live in sin. In other words, through faith in what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are set free from the power of sin to control our lives. Furthermore, we are enabled to please God and actually turn away from sinful behaviours and attitudes that hurt us and others and our relationship to God.

On the other hand, there is nothing more damaging to our witness than when others can label us as hypocrites because we try to present ourselves as "holier-than-thou" "super-Christians" who never stumble. Have you seen the T shirt which reads "God Loves You... But I'm his Favourite"... That simply isn't reality. Always remembering that we are forgiven sinner-saints is the proper welcoming and welcome-able attitude to have. It is the attitude that brings welcome relief and allows others to respond to Jesus Christ and become part of Welcome, Inc. — to become incorporated into God's kingdom.

What a responsibility and privilege! God has decided on the route of incarnation and incorporation — and no other route. In other words, God dares to entrust us with his message of welcome completely, so completely, in fact, that we are invited and challenged to actually take the message into us and, in a certain sense, become the message. When that happens, we become welcoming to and welcome-able by others so that, they too can have access to God's free gift — eternal life. It is our mission to share that life with others. At this and every branch of Welcome, Inc. sharing the welcoming good news of Jesus Christ is our business, our only business.

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