

How To Be Human: Welcome

*A sermon preached on Matthew 10:40-42 on Sunday, June 28, 2026,
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I.

Back in 2010, performance artist Marina Abramovic presented a 700-hour piece at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City called “The Artist is Present.” For any length of time, at any time during open hours, anybody could sit in front of Abramovic and look at her face-to-face. Now it might surprise you to hear this, but people came in droves to do it. Some giggled nervously. Some cried. One person sat and stared at her for hours, and another did so all day. By the end of the project, nearly a half a million people did so, and every day Abramovic remained, as one critic said, “persistently, uncomfortably there.”¹

I have to tell you about your expressions right now – some of you look horrified! You can hardly think of anything worse than staring at a stranger all day! Others of you look incredulous or curious. So I wonder, what would you do in that situation? Would you go sit and stare at the artist? Would you ever do an experiment as bold as Abramovic’s? Or does just the thought of it make you cringe in a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad awkward way?

You wouldn’t be alone. Researchers tell us that looking at one another is one of our most revealing forms of communication, from the gestures we do, to the movements we make, to the postures we hold, to the facial expressions we form.² These make up a primal, nonverbal language that we humans use to communicate with one another, a language that transcends all

¹ Story as told by Christine Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience: Being Human in a Disembodied World*, p36-37.

² This section of today’s sermon is deeply formed by my current read through Christine Rosen’s book referenced above, particularly her chapter called “Face to Face.”

others, a central expression to what makes us healthy humans since the beginning of time. I trust every one of us has had an experience with a language barrier, and our charades get very active as we try to communicate across difference. People fall in love this way, grow in their understanding of one another this way, and are significantly more likely to agree to help someone if the request is made in person rather than over the phone, text, or Zoom! (Don't ask how your pastors know this!)

But researchers also note that humans increasingly have a preference for other mediated forms of communication. In these past years, our communication has shifted from mostly face to face, through mostly voice to voice, and now mostly words on a screen to words on a screen, perhaps with some emojis or memes thrown in for color. In fact, I bet all of us have the experience daily of walking into a doctor's office waiting room, or a train station, or a grocery store checkout line, only to find everyone around us on their phone. (I won't ask for a show of hands of how many of us do that very thing!) Some don't even look up and acknowledge we're there at all.

As the researchers say, "looking someone in the eye is a subtle gesture of inclusiveness, a small but significant act of civil attention."³ But I daresay – politics notwithstanding – our modern American life is one more of civil disengagement, than civil attention. There's a German expression, *wie Luft behandeln*, which means "to look or be looked at as if through air," or in the parlance of our time,⁴ "to look right through someone."⁵ What does it do to our experience of being human when we don't even look at each other? Are we past the point of recognition at all?

³ Ibid., p38.

⁴ Channeling a Rev. Joe Phelps-ism, quoting *The Big Lebowski* any chance he gets.

⁵ Rosen, p38.

II.

Recognition, you see, is where the story of humanity begins. For when God created all things and saw humankind made in the divine image, God said they were very good. Each and every one of us, from the very start are imbued with that recognition of our dignity and belovedness, no exception. This, then, becomes the foundation of Jesus's life and ministry, that every person bears that divine spark and is worthy of God's gifts and graces. Today's text bears witness to that distinct truth.

We've spent the past weeks in the tenth chapter of Matthew's gospel, often called by scholars as the missionary discourse – telling the disciples how they are to go and teach and heal and serve and preach in his name, reminding them they're not to take any creature comforts along for the journey, instructing them to rely on the kindnesses of others, and warning them that there will be hardship, even division, on the road. And in these three short verses that conclude the narrative, Jesus summarizes what he's been telling his disciples all along the way: that their mission as they go and serve in the world is bound up with hospitality, that “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” It is a claim as audacious as it is simple.

Just think about it. In Jesus's eyes, when a disciple of his is welcomed, it is as if Jesus is welcomed. When a disciple is shown hospitality, it is as if Jesus is shown hospitality. When a prophet is received or a cup of cold water is given, rewards will be in store. Now I have to imagine that Jesus may have had a more aggressive expectation of what the disciples could understand. Maybe he expected his disciples to read between these lines and understand their dual call. Because *welcome* goes both ways, doesn't it? How we welcome

and how we are welcomed both reveal something about God, and as followers of Jesus, we are always moving in between as both the welcomer and the welcomed. For his disciples who are to go with nothing, they will experience what it's like to be welcomed by those with more. And in seasons of plenty, they will experience welcoming those with less. Later in the gospel, Matthew will return to this theme in that famous parable of the sheep and the goats, "whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me." That welcome is as fundamental an expression of the gospel as just about anything we do, because it recognizes the God-given dignity of each human life, and because Jesus says, "if you welcome them, you welcome me!" So why is this such a hard commitment to practice?

III.

Not long ago, community organizer and professor John McKnight was sharing a public dialogue with his friend Ivan Illich, the sociologist, writer, and theologian, regarding charitable institutions and the work they do in the world. "When did it all go bad?," McKnight asked Illich. Ivan Illich smiled, read between the lines of that question, and told a story:

"In a little Italian village in the eighth century," he said, "whenever a stranger knocked on a door, the stranger would be welcomed and given a place to stay and food to eat. In the eighth century, a monastery was built on the hill overlooking the village. And since it was a cloistered community, and they did not allow guests to stay with them, they built a little building on the back of the monastery, for the stranger. One of the people from the village learned about it and spread the word throughout the village. So afterwards, when the stranger would stop at a villager's door, the citizens of the village would send the stranger to the monastery, to stay in the room behind the

monastery out back. That was the first hostel ever created. And that,” Ivan Illich said, “was when the community gave away its power to care for one another.”⁶

It’s a searing story, isn’t it? Because from there, more distanced ways of caring for strangers emerged. Hospitals, hospices, hostels were created by Christians, all out of this commitment to hospitality and (if you notice) all sharing that same root word of *hospitality* too. In the Greek, *philoxenia* combines the word for love of kinship (*phileo*) and the word for stranger (*xenos*).⁷

But in each of these cases, welcome was outsourced to professionals instead of being practiced by ordinary citizens. Along the way, that commitment to welcoming the stranger shifted a bit, grew distant, cloistered to particular spaces with particular resources. I wonder if perhaps this is a reason why people going through illness in a hospital or death in a hospice house feel so removed from the world around us. Anyone who has experienced homelessness would tell you that among their greatest needs of all is simply to be seen, because most of us don’t even look folks who are unhoused in the eye. I don’t want to ask for a show of hands to see if you agree, but I know I would feel a bit squeamish if someone knocked on my door at my house in need of a place to stay. So from hospitals to hospice houses to hostels, it’s no wonder that hospitality is housed in particular spaces for particular ways. Welcoming the stranger is hard!

⁶ As told by Michael Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places*, p55-56. The original source for this story is from the John McKnight speech, “My Friendship with Ivan Illich,” given at Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, IN, on April 6, 2009.

⁷ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, p31.

Yet you might be thinking to yourself, weren't we all just welcomed by the church's hospitality committee who made possible our wonderful brunch this morning? Don't we enjoy the fruits of the hospitality industry every time we eat in a restaurant, or go out for coffee, or stay in a hotel? Is it just that over time, expansive hospitality as Jesus described has been sequestered, and specific hospitality has been redefined? Or have these lines been blurred beyond all recognition?

You know, when lines and borders aren't blurred but rather are tight, the irony is not lost on me – this week especially – that often the loudest evangelists for the Christianization of our country, demanding a Christian way of living for us all, are also the first to refuse recognition of the stranger within. So what, then, is our responsibility as followers of Jesus to reclaim the wide welcome that Jesus demands? What will it take for us to practice Christian hospitality, even when it discomforts us with God's love that knows no boundaries, even when we'd rather hold our lines tight? What will it take for us to receive Christian hospitality, even when it feels hard, or embarrassing, or like a role we don't often occupy? And what will keep us human all along the way?

IV.

Dr. William Sloane Coffin was the longtime, transformative pastor of Riverside Church in NYC. One Sunday, he invited another preaching giant, Fred Craddock, to come and preach at Riverside. You've heard me tell stories of both these preachers, but let me remind you that Craddock grew up in East Tennessee and served congregations around the American South. So when he got that invitation to Riverside Church in New York City, Craddock thought he was really in tall cotton. This was one of the most influential, powerful

churches in the United States! Rev. Coffin invited Rev. Craddock to stay at his apartment, where he left a note on the refrigerator door that said, “If you usually eat breakfast, [I don’t have any here.] But you can go down to the church. We have a breakfast for the homeless people.”

Down he went that morning to the basement of the church, where with a metal tray in his hand, Craddock stood in a line of two hundred folks who were unhoused, waiting for breakfast. Talking with the people in front of and behind him in line, he struck up conversation: “What’s your story? How did you get here?” One man said, “Well, it was substance abuse. I’m sober now, but that’s how I lost everything and ended up here.” Another said, “My marriage fell apart. I was left with nothing.” “Really?”, Craddock said. “Yeah,” the man replied. “So what put you here?”, one of the guys asked Craddock. He thought for a moment and answered honestly, “I was invited!”

Craddock didn’t know how to answer and didn’t want to create any distance so he just ate what everyone else ate and talked with people. But after breakfast, he went back to the pastor’s study at Riverside Church to ready himself for worship. It was a Sunday, after all. When the hour had come, Craddock got up and put on his robe with all the stripes and symbols and colors on it. He stood up in that beautiful pulpit of the Riverside Church, with hundreds of people gathered, a huge choir, an enormous organ. As he said, “it just gave goose bumps on goose bumps,” he remembered. But remembering his morning, as he moved to take his place in the pulpit, he said to himself, “What’s my story? Who am I? [I see!] I’m a guest, a guest of God, a guest of Christ, and a guest of the church.”⁸

⁸ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p102-103.

V.

Friends, I do believe that Christian hospitality – welcoming others like you would welcome Jesus – must start with recognition. With seeing and being seen, no matter who we are. So I want to invite you to practice seeing this week. Seeing yourself. Seeing your neighbor. Seeing the stranger. Practicing seeing may mean you have to put your phone down, or lift your eyes up. It may mean you have awkward encounters when you look at people in the eye, though you don't have to stare at them for hours. I also want you to allow yourself to be seen, no matter how vulnerable it may feel. And once you do, I imagine welcome, then, will be within reach, like a plate of breakfast shared as equals, or like a cup of cold water extended in Jesus's name.

May it be so for each and every one of us! Amen!