

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
June 28, 2020
Pentecost 4

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today's gospel text is only three verses long.

But it is a passage that is packed with a powerful message.

On the surface, it looks to be a message about hospitality.

Indeed, Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

That sounds nice and quaint, doesn't it?

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

Quite lovely, no?

But, when we dive into this passage we see that this text is more about representation than it is about hospitality.

This text is about representation.

PAUSE

Now, in order to understand what I mean, we need to become familiar with a Jewish concept call *shaliach*. Sheel-LEE'-ack

The word sounds like a mispronunciation of the liquid one rubs onto wood—shellac.

But this Hebrew word is sheel-LEE'-ack.

And the concept of *shaliach* recognizes that an individual's duly authorized messenger is to be received as if one is receiving that individual.

An individual's duly authorized messenger is to be received as if one is receiving that individual.

So for instance, putting it in contemporary terms, imagine the CEO of a company sending an underling to some place in order to conduct the business of the company that underling represents.

Those persons with whom the underling is conducting business, would see the underling, not as himself or herself, but as if he or she is actually the CEO.

That is the concept of *shaliach*.

An individual's duly authorized messenger is to be received as if it is the individual.

Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

In saying this, Jesus is referring to that concept in ancient Jewish law called *shaliach*.

And so, in the scenario from our gospel reading, Jesus sends his disciples out as missionaries, saying that those who receive the disciples with favor, are really receiving Jesus.

But what is truly radical here is what Jesus says next.

"Whoever welcomes me [Jesus] welcomes the one who sent me."

Jesus sends the disciples out, and according to *shaliach* those who receive the disciples are really in effect receiving Jesus.

And furthermore, those who receive Jesus are really in effect receiving the one who sent Jesus, namely God the Father.

So by the transitive property, Jesus is saying that to receive the disciples is to receive God the Father.

Talk about taking *shaliach* to its fullest extreme.

The disciples represent God.

So, let me reiterate—there are not two distinct thoughts here such that...

To receive the disciples is to receive Jesus. Full stop, end of first thought.

AND, the second thought is, to receive Jesus is to receive God the Father.

No, there are not two distinct thoughts, but instead these thoughts are tied together, such as to say...

To receive the disciples is to receive Jesus, which in turn is to receive God the Father.

That is how the English translators understand this verse anyway.

They tied the thoughts together into one sentence.

Note that in the original Greek NT, there are no marks of punctuation designating where one sentence ends and another begins.

In the original Greek NT, the Greek letters are all capitalized and there are no breaks between words or paragraphs.

The Greek text consisted of a single string of continual letters, but it wasn't that the string went on across the page indefinitely.

Each page of text consisted of two columns of 36 lines, with the width of each column being about 15-17 letters.

The ancient reader read the text across each line, moving down the column, and then picked up with the next column.

They read the text in this way as just a string of Greek letters.

PAUSE

My point being is that it is up to the translator to interpret where one thought ended and another began.

In this case, the English translators feel the sentence reads...

Whoever welcomes the disciples is in effect welcoming God.

To receive the disciples is to be receiving God—*shaliach* to its fullest.

And as a disciple of Jesus, to hear Jesus says this, it must have been quite an ego trip.

The disciples probably had an over-inflated sense of self.

“Look at me, I represent God.”

But then Jesus goes on, saying, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.”

Now, it is at this point that the interpretation of the gospel reading gets a little muddy.

Is Jesus the prophet mentioned here, and the disciples are the ones who receive the prophet Jesus?

Or, are the disciples themselves the prophets, because they have been sent by Jesus, who is sent by God the Father?

Are the disciples the prophets and those who receive them are the non-believers whom the disciples are evangelizing?

Who is prophet in this verse? Jesus or the disciples.

I tend to think that the answer is both.

Indeed, maybe that is why the meaning of this verse is ambiguous.

Jesus leaves the interpretation of the verse open-ended, because he wants us to see the answer as including both options.

Jesus is the prophet.

And the disciples are also prophets.

And so, here we have the disciples thinking pretty highly of themselves for additional reasons.

First, they are told by Jesus, that because of the transitive property they represent God to those they evangelize.

And second, and with respect to the first point, the disciples are deemed to be on par with the prophets.

And third, they are told because they have welcomed the prophet Jesus, they will receive the reward of a prophet.

Alright! Except wait—the prophet's reward?

What exactly is the prophet's reward?

Well, as we see so often in the Old Testament, the prophets are persecuted, the prophets are mocked, and the prophets are killed, all because they are proclaiming the Word of God.

Jesus himself, who was considered a prophet...Jesus himself is crucified and killed for his proclamation of God's Word.

PAUSE

And so the disciples have been experiencing this self-inflated sense of self.

They have been experiencing this ego trip, when all of sudden Jesus hits them with the news that they will receive the prophet's reward.

Some reward, right?

But in truth, this reward was envisioned by early Christians somewhat differently.

Early Christians understood that if one indeed suffered with Christ, suffered like he did, even dying for the faith, well then they would also experience resurrection and new life in Christ.

This is the trade-off, when it comes to *shaliach*.

Eternal life is the reward for the life of obedient service, a life that could prove to be very trying, especially when one is serving as the representative of God.

Eternal life is the reward, but obtaining eternal life might be no picnic.

PAUSE

So yes, raised up to be God's representative, designated as prophets—the disciples were feeling pretty good about themselves.

They liked this idea of *shaliach*.

But just so the disciples didn't become too arrogant, too conceited, too self-inflated, Jesus reminds his disciples that even though they experience a unique position, there is a trade-off.

There is a trade-off.

The prophet's reward accompanies the faithful disciple.

PAUSE

Now we know that trade-offs are part and parcel to life.

The famous actor and actress no doubt enjoys the glamorous lifestyle, but we often hear about how those same celebrities are frustrated by the fact that they have no privacy.

That is often the trade-off with fame.

Professional sports figures enjoy a good life, too, playing the game they love. But often times sports figures suffer multiple injuries in their career, and they experience physical and even mental disabilities in later life.

That is often the trade-off with sports.

There are trade-offs with most everything in life.

As pastors, my wife and I have often noted how the ministry has allowed us flexibility within our schedules, which is a good thing.

Over the years, we have been able to schedule doctor's appointments for our kids during the workday, knowing we could make up the time for work at some other point in the week.

We have that flexibility.

The trade-off is that as pastors we are always on call, even when a parishioner is dying at 3:00 o'clock in the morning.

So yes, life consists of trade-offs.

Consider the trade-offs in your own life.

PAUSE

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is highlighting the trade-off that comes with being a Christian.

And question then that each one of us needs to answer is whether we are willing to take the trade-off.

But, actually, the question is rendered moot, once we have been baptized.

As baptized Christians, we already are in this “Christian” thing for life.

As baptized Christians, God in Jesus Christ has already claimed us to be his representatives in the world.

Can’t get out of it now.

Sometimes I wonder if we pastors shouldn’t be a little more forthright with parents when they are having their children baptized, such as to say to those parents, “Are you really sure you want to do this? Do you understand what you are getting your child into?”

But most of us pastors don’t go there.

Most of pastors don’t go into the trade-off.

PAUSE

Yes, sisters and brothers in Christ, today Jesus reminds us that because we are Christians there are certain trade-offs.

As Christians, we have the honor of being God’s prophets.

But that means that where there is injustice in the world, we have the responsibility to speak up.

That is the trade-off.

As Christians, we are blessed to be called God’s representatives in the world.

But that means that where there is indifference in the world, we have obligation offer Christ’s love and mercy.

That is the trade-off.

As Christians, we are promised new life, eternal life.

But that means we may very well have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

That is the trade-off.

PAUSE

Yes, sisters and brothers, we have been baptized.

Yes, we have been sent by God in Jesus Christ to be the very representatives of God in the world.

Yes, like it or not, we have imprinted with Sheel-LEE'-ack.

"Whoever welcome you, welcomes me," says Jesus, "And whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me."

Yes, there is a trade-off. But I know that if we were ever to stop and think about it, we would take this trade-off every day of the week and twice on Sunday.

Thanks be to God. Amen.