The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

In July of 1965, the sign in front of every Episcopal parish that we have become so accustomed to we can easily overlook, made its debut. The blue and white sign with the Episcopal Shield on it that says: *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You*. Over the past 61 years, in addition to being on the sign marking Episcopal parishes, the slogan has been printed on banners, bumper stickers, postcards, window stickers, bookmarks, t-shirts, water bottles, pens and pencils, just about anything used in marketing you can think of. It has been updated multiple times, once in 2009 when it was used in a series of television commercials and again in 2022 as part of the Episcopal immigration and refugee ministry campaign.

The words *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You* are more than a snappy slogan, catchphrase, or branding. Like much of what we do in the Episcopal Church, there is careful theological thought and intention behind those words, as they represent our attempt as an institution and parish to follow Jesus, who reminds us being welcoming is a characteristic of God. Which, incidentally, is why respecting the dignity of every human being is one of our Baptismal vows; because it reflects the welcoming love of God to others. This makes the words on the sign an invitation, a promise, and a challenging responsibility.

The words *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You* are an invitation for all God's people of all walks of life: all ages, genders, races, abilities, people of all levels of economic status, education, political parties, backgrounds, especially the marginalized, including minorities and those who have been harmed by organized religion. The promise is that every Episcopal parish will be a safe haven, especially for anyone alienated by religion and those seeking healing from religious trauma or abuse. It is also a promise this is a place for spiritual discovery and growth. It is a challenging responsibility to live into that promise, to be open to receiving questions people might have, to listen, and at the same time to provide the kind of boundaries that balance growth with feeling safe.

Ironically, despite the Church's best intentions, we were not fully living into the words *The Episcopal Church Welcomes You* when they first appeared on our signs in 1965. For example, back then, women were not permitted to officially participate as delegates to General Convention, women could not be ordained, serve as acolytes, ushers, or vestry members. Same-sex couples couldn't be married. There were no Black presiding bishops. In other words, as Bishop Matt has said, the front doors of the church were open to everyone, but the metaphorical doors *inside* the church, the doors that opened the sacraments of marriage, ordination, or participation in leadership and church councils were closed to some people.

Which made the church question if we were living up to the invitation, the promise, and challenging responsibility of being welcoming that we had branded ourselves as. That is the kind of question that doesn't have a quick, simple, easy answer. It's the kind of question the Church lived into by prayerfully realizing if we open only some doors and not all doors, then we aren't living up to our vow to respect the dignity of all people. So, slowly, painfully, with lots of dissenting opinions and struggles, through years of prayer, discernment, listening to the Holy Spirit and each other, the study of scriptures, ethics, and morals, things changed. We changed. Some might argue it might have been easier to change the sign. But the church decided to do the hard work of growing into the words on the sign instead. Because we take embodying God's love on earth seriously. It could be said the church is still at work changing as we continue to strive to live into the invitation, promise, and challenging responsibility to be welcoming, like Jesus in today's Gospel seems to proclaim.

This short Gospel reading is Jesus' last words of a very long speech to his disciples about going out into area towns and villages to prepare them for Jesus to visit. Those who have been in church the last few Sundays have been reading that speech in bits and pieces where Jesus told his disciples to go out with nothing but the clothes on their backs, to be prepared for rejection, and to stay briefly in each town. Today's Gospel is the final bit where Jesus talked about being welcomed. At the time, Jesus was preparing disciples who were not the elite of society, who were likely to be dismissed or rejected and have a tough time completing the mission. Jesus ended his speech by advising his disciples to focus on those who welcomed them, because in so doing, they would be welcoming not only the disciples but also Jesus and God.

This is slightly different from our two signs outside, by the entrances to our two parking lots that pronounce welcome to everyone who comes to our building. Those signs indicate we are the ones doing the welcoming while in today's Gospel, Jesus was talking about being welcomed.

Today that might be an additional invitation, promise, and challenging responsibility to not only receive people the way we imagine Jesus would, but to go out into the world as Jesus would. While we have much to celebrate here at St. Matthias for the ways we live into the invitation, promise, and challenging responsibility to ***be*** welcoming through our worship services and ministries like Tom's Table, Caritas, the Little Free Pantry, the Thrift Shop, keeping the church open during office hours for anyone to stop by during the week and sit in the nave for prayer or just to cool off on a hot summer day or warm up on a cold winter day, or sit in our churchyard for a rest or for prayer, today's Gospel might be inviting us to the spiritual practice of receiving a welcome by bringing Christ wherever you go.

Representing Jesus isn't just for the disciples in the Gospel; its for us modern followers of Jesus too. Wherever any of us go: to visit friends or family, to medical appointments, stores, restaurants, workplaces, where you volunteer, even where you go on vacation, you can bring the love of God embodied in Jesus by what you say and do. Being forgiving instead of resentful, curious instead of judgmental, generous instead of stingy, including or making room for those you notice are being left out, being patient, willing to learn something new or consider a different perspective, are just a few ways to bring Jesus with you wherever you go. I know it can be easy to forget when we leave worship services that we are tasked to go out into the world to love and serve God, just like it was difficult for the Episcopal Church to live into the invitation, promise and challenging responsibly on our sign. But passing that same sign on the way out of our parking lot, can be a reminder to keep trying, to forgive ourselves when we fail, and practice thinking about how any welcome you are given is an invitation, a promise, and responsibility for you to bring the love of God in Jesus into that welcome, transforming it into one of those cups of cold, refreshing water of resurrection life.