



June 28 – Welcome

In the latter part of his career, my Dad was a corporate turnaround specialist. He would be hired by a company that was approaching bankruptcy and guide them back to financial viability and success. Once one company had been turned around, he was off to the next, until there was not a next. He was almost 60 years old and nowhere wanted to hire him. He would apply for entry level jobs and would be declined because of his vast experience. He would apply for upper-level jobs and be denied because he was old. They would blame it on something else, but agism is real in corporate America.

He spent three years actively looking for work. Daily searches and applications and a tall stack of rejections. In the middle of the search he proclaimed, "That's it. Maybe I will be a greeter at Sam's Club." He was starting to think that all he was good for was offering a word of welcome to those passing by. Not long after, he was offered a job at Kinze Manufacturing and finished his career there.

I still think about his "greeter" comment from time to time. This week is one of those times. The word "Welcome" is an interesting word. It comes from two words in Olde English meaning that the arrival of someone suites the other's wishes. It makes sense for a store or restaurant to say that you are "Welcome." You are the customer and without customers, there is no profit, etc. Your arrival suits the other's will and needs.

The truth is that a welcome is often passive. It is something you say as someone arrives and then it can easily move to the background. We do it too, even though we know better. Each week we welcome those who are gathered with us online, and then we move on. I feel very convicted by this truth.

Jesus speaks of something different. As Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me," he is not talking about a passive greeting. The word in Greek has to do with receiving someone. It is literally to receive or take in. It refers to a high level of self-involvement by the one who is receiving. This is not a nice "hello" or a tolerance of someone who is different. This means you are to do everything you can to make sure the person is affirmed and valued. This is not about the will of agenda of the one receiving; it is about the person who is received.

Personally, I think my Dad would have been a terrible greeter. Not because would not be welcoming, it is because he lived a life of receiving others for who they were. For him, it was active engagement in those that he met and encountered. He built enduring relationships with those others would have simply welcomed. To my Dad, they were like family. At his retirement, we had several salespeople show up. My Dad spent many years in Purchasing, but that was decades earlier. These salespeople showed up at the retirement and his Visitation and Memorial Service.

As Pride Month draws to a close, it feels important to name this difference between welcome and receive. The Church has all too often equated Welcome and Tolerance as Receiving and Affirming. These are not the same. One is a willingness to acknowledge a person's presence. The other is to work to make sure the person is not only seen but heard and valued. One is about assimilating or blending in. The other is about celebrating the whole of each person.

Jesus is asking us to receive those who are on the outskirts, reminding us that to receive them is to receive Jesus, and also to receive God's self. We have made great strides in moving from a passive welcome to an active receiving of others. May we never tire of this work. Amen