

Jesus: The Minister of Welcome

Rich Nathan
December 15 & 16, 2018
Four Part Harmony
Luke

If you had to summarize the message and ministry of Jesus in one word, what would that one word be? Or let me put it a little differently for you. If you were to choose a single word to describe the feeling people have as they experienced Jesus' kingdom, what would that word be?

The word that I would choose is

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Welcome

I'm not being terribly original in this. A lot of New Testament scholars have said the same thing. One New Testament scholar, Krister Stendahl, wrote that

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Wherever, whenever, however the kingdom manifests itself it is welcome.

Why would I choose welcome? To many people these days, welcome is more tangible and behavioral than the word love. Certainly, you can say Jesus' ministry could be summed up by the word love. But these days, love has been watered down. Most people associate it with feelings. On the other hand, welcome is associated with behavior and action. To welcome someone is to do something.

Welcome gets down into the nitty gritty of life. Welcome has to do with the way that we relate to our spouse, our children, our grandchildren, our co-workers, our roommates, members of the church, people we meet in the grocery store. Do our words, our presence, our faith, does it seem welcoming to people? Do they feel acceptance in our presence? And more personally, when people show up at church, do they feel like the church is warm and I am warm towards them? When people show up at our home, do people feel like Marlene and our home is a place of hospitality and rest and peace?

Of course, welcome is not just at an individual level – that's how I treat you when we're standing in line at the grocery store. Welcome is also city-wide and even global. How does the city that we live in communicate welcome to the poor, to people who are just moving here – to immigrants, to a newborn child, to an unborn child, to someone with

disabilities? If I had to capture the ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Luke using one word, I would use the word welcome.

You know, welcome is particularly important these days because we live in perhaps the loneliest time in human history. There are a record number of people in the United States who live alone. In fact, while our population has a little more than doubled since 1950, the number of single person households has gone up eight times. Nearly 30% of American adults live alone.

Loneliness is associated with more suicides, more opioid abuse, more poverty and more depression. If ever there was a time when the welcome of Jesus practiced through his followers was needed, especially for the lonely, it is today!

We are in the Advent season right now. Advent in the Christian calendar is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas Day. This year, we're looking at the four distinctive portraits painted of Jesus by each of the four gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first week we looked at Matthew's portrait of Jesus in a message that I titled "Jesus: The Fulfiller of God's Promises". Last week, we looked at Mark's portrait of Jesus in message I titled "Jesus: A Different Kind of Messiah". Today, I want to look at Luke's gospel in a message I titled "Jesus: The Minister of Welcome". Let's pray.

As I said in my introduction, Jesus' ministry was a welcoming ministry.

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Jesus was a welcomer

Even his enemies recognized that. Here's what we read in Luke 15

Slide Luke 15:1-2

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Let me give you a little bit of background here. The Pharisees were a Jewish sect. The name Pharisee comes from a Hebrew word

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Parush = separatist

The Pharisees were religious Jews who believed that they needed to separate themselves from sinners in order for them to maintain the kind of ritual holiness and purity necessary to draw near to God.

Jesus was not only hanging around with sinners, but we read in verse 2:

Slide Luke 15:2

² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then to give you a little bit of cultural background, to eat with someone in first century Jewish culture was so much more than grabbing a bite to eat. To eat with someone was to invite that person into a relationship of intimacy and friendship. When two people were at odds with each other – maybe they had some kind of conflict between them – the way the conflict would be resolved was by one of them inviting the other over for a meal. Eating together was a sign that our relationship is now healed and we are now reconciled.

For Jesus to eat with sinners communicated that Jesus wanted to have a relationship with sinners. He was welcoming sinners and he was saying that he wanted to be friends with sinners. Just as an aside, that’s why Judas’ betrayal of Jesus after eating with him at the Last Supper was so shocking. Judas was communicating, according to the culture of the day, that I am your friend. You are safe with me. To hurt someone after eating with them was a horrible breach of social custom.

So the Pharisees look at Jesus and they are just shaking their heads. They can’t understand why Jesus would invite into intimate friendship with himself people they wouldn’t give the time of day to – terrible people, people who don’t try to follow the laws of God the way that folks today might relate to people coming out of prison or in a halfway house or folks just coming off of drugs. Why would you want to be friends with them?

We need to understand that Jesus who is God incarnate – God come in the flesh – continually reveals God as someone who welcomes everyone. God welcomes people who don’t know him. God welcomes sinners. God welcomes people who have broken the rules. Take a moment and think of people who you struggle with, someone who grates on you – someone at work or in your family or in your neighborhood. Maybe the person who grates on you is a politician, someone on TV or an actor or actress. Think for a moment about someone who grates on you. Try to wrap your mind around the idea that God has his arms stretched out in welcome towards that person. Even those we can’t stomach, even those who have a radically different political affiliation than you. They are much more liberal than you are or much more conservative than you. God has his arms open and his hands stretched out in welcome, whether that person is wearing a MAGA hat or a pink pussy hat or a kufi worn by Muslim men or a hijab that covers a Muslim woman’s head. God welcomes everyone.

I'm not saying that God likes everything that people do. There are a lot of things that God hates that we do. But God welcomes people. I'm not saying that God says that every choice is equally ok in his sight, but God welcomes people, all people, with open arms – anyone who wants to come to him. Jesus invites everyone – prisoners and professors, soccer moms and single moms, tiger moms and timid moms, grandparents and Millennials, divorcees and marrieds, CEOs and the unemployed. Jesus invites everyone to come to him into friendship and relationship with him.

This Christmas, each of us who are part of Vineyard Columbus could communicate just a little bit of the welcome of God by inviting someone to Christmas Eve services at one of our campuses. You know, you don't have to invite a stranger you just met at the grocery store or at Starbucks. If you're the kind of person that's comfortable inviting strangers, please do so. But why not invite a friend? Or a family member? Or someone you work with that you have relationship with? The service is going to be great. The message will be short (I promise!). People's kids are welcome. Christmas Eve is a great opportunity for every one of us to communicate something of the welcome of Jesus toward people.

What we find in Luke's gospel is that in demonstrating God's kingdom and in showing the world the heart of God, Jesus welcomes people who at best would have been marginalized in his society, at worst completely rejected. I haven't the time to go through all the various groups that Jesus reaches out to in a shocking way – Gentiles, the sick, Roman leaders. In speaking about Jesus' ministry of welcome, I want to focus on three groups Luke gives prominence to in his gospel – women, the poor and sinners.

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Jesus welcomes women

Women feature very prominently in Luke's gospel, more than any other gospel. We have two long stories at the beginning of Luke told from the perspective of Jesus' mother and Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. We have the testimony of the prophetess Anna when the baby Jesus was presented in the temple. Women are financial supporters of Jesus' ministry. They figure prominently in his parables and his healings. And women are witnesses to his suffering, death, burial and resurrection.

But I want to take a look at one particular story that you may have read before.

Slide Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

What was Martha’s problem with her sister, Mary’s, behavior? Certainly, one of the issues that Martha was dealing with was the difference between sitting and serving. There’s Martha running around the house getting the food ready for Jesus, and I assume all of his male disciples. She’s trying to be a good hostess, to entertain Jesus and the disciples well. Martha is making this party happen. You know that in order for some people to sit around and enjoy Christmas dinner, other people need to buy it and cook it and serve it and clean up after. The general rule of life in order to have some people sit comfortably, other people need to serve diligently.

Those of us who are sitters, it’s good to be reminded every once in a while that things don’t magically happen. Other people make your life work. You might want to remind your children and your spouse of that truth from time to time. And you might want to pitch in and serve this Christmas, at least by helping clean up afterwards!

This is certainly true at church. In order for some people to sit and listen to a message or to be able to worship and make a spiritual connection with God, other people need to run around to make sure the building is clean, the sound is good, the worship team has prepared, the heat is on, the coffee is out, the bulletins are printed, and the message makes sense.

If I might gently nudge you as we head into the New Year, might some of you be called to not simply sit, but to serve? If you ever desire to serve here at Vineyard Columbus, you can go to:

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www.vineyardcolumbus.org/volunteer

to find out about opportunities that are available for you to “help out in the kitchen” here at Vineyard Columbus.

There’s another issue that caused Martha’s upset and it’s not just sitting vs. serving. The particular issue that bothered Martha had to do with who gets to do the sitting and who must do the serving in traditional societies. We’re talking about the issue of men vs. women.

Certainly, one of Martha’s problems was that Mary was behaving as if she was a man. Tom Wright, who is one of the world’s great New Testament scholars alive today, points out that in the first century as in many parts of the world today, houses were divided

into male spaces and female spaces. Male and female roles were strictly delineated. Mary had crossed an invisible, but huge, boundary within the house, and even more importantly, in the social world. The public room was where men met together. The kitchen and the outer corridors, that were unseen by outsiders, were the places for women and children.

In Luke 10, Mary is taking the position of a student of Jesus. She was a disciple. And Martha is upset because that place was to be occupied only by men. I've seen this where women and men who have more traditional views of appropriate gender roles become very upset with women who choose non-traditional roles. Why are you in this work space when you should be in the domestic space? Why are you in a place that men typically occupy when you are a woman?

It's quite upsetting to traditionalists when women begin to intrude on spaces traditionally occupied by men. When I was growing up, I remember hearing medical doctors say that it would be physically dangerous for women to run a marathon. There was a medical reason for women to not run long distances – women's bodies simply be injured if a woman ran a marathon. Therefore, the women's marathon had to be banned from the Olympics. People were very upset when women began pressing in regarding athletics.

When I was a young adult, I remember lots of debate about women not having what it took to be police officers, to serve in the military, to become firefighters. There was a civil war in the church regarding allowing women to become preachers or pastors or church planters or missionaries.

How many of you women were raised with limitations regarding what Jesus might be calling you to professionally or personally? You were told that because you're a woman, you could never be expected to enter a particular profession or take over Dad's business or be an engineer or be good in math. How many of you women growing up were taught that God limited you regarding the particular ministry you could exercise in church simply because of your gender?

Here at Vineyard Columbus, we believe that God's gifts and God's calling in ministry are issued to irrespective of gender. There's no gender limit on who can teach or who can preach or who can lead worship or pastor or be an elder or be a church planter or a missionary or a senior pastor. If you'd like to read more about our view here at Vineyard Columbus, you can go online to my website:

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www.richnathan.org

Keyword search: WOMEN

I've got a few papers in there on women's role in the church. Or you can pick up one of my books, like *Both-And*.

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Cover of Both-And

I've got a chapter in there laying out the biblical and theological case for women in ministry.

Why was Mary commended by Jesus in this story? Because in a society that was thoroughly male-dominated, Mary was able to fight through all the cultural negativity and even the negativity of her sister. Martha felt Mary was getting a little too big for her britches.

But Mary said, "I'm not going to take my cues regarding what my calling is from my big sister. I'm not going to take my cues regarding what my calling is from my brother or from my society or from all the naysayers. There's only one person I have to listen to and that's Jesus." I'm going to ask myself the question, "What does Jesus want from me? What did Jesus create me for? What is Jesus' call on my life? Will you do that, sisters? Will you ask Jesus what he wants for your life?"

In the gospel of Luke, we see that Jesus welcomes women. And in Luke, Jesus not only welcomes women, Jesus welcomes the poor.

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Jesus welcomes the poor

Like women, the poor figure prominently in Luke's gospel. God's heart for the poor is demonstrated very early on in the gospel in the song of Mary.

Slide Luke 1:52-53

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

Only in Luke do we read the parable of the foolish rich man who hoards all of his wealth only to call down judgment on himself. Only in Luke do we have Jesus' sermon in his home synagogue of Nazareth recorded this way.

Slide Luke 4:16-18a

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.”

As I’ve mentioned in prior messages, everyone in the world, especially at Christmas, has a message of good news to the wealthy. Our mailbox is filled with catalogs at Christmas time. Catalogs for jewelry, clothing, fruit baskets, cruises and cars. Everyone has good news for the wealthy. You fill out this application and we’ll give you this black diamond credit card, this blue sapphire credit card, this elite status credit card and join our very exclusive club. I get to be part of an exclusive club of 85 million people that you sent this offer to. Wow, I feel so honored. Every day there is good news to the wealthy.

You’ve heard about income inequality in America and how virtually every graph on wealth over the last 40 years looks like an open pair of scissors. Right now, in America, the wealthiest 1% of Americans own 40% of the country’s wealth. The top 1% owns 40%. The top 1% in America owns more wealth than the bottom 90% combined.

There’s a recent study that I found really fascinating. Researchers said to people, “Let’s say you have 100 people and 100 pieces of pie and you wanted to distribute the pie fairly.” Let’s say you believe in capitalism and that people are all different. Some people work harder than others. Some people are lazy. Some people are really talented and add tremendous value to the world. Other people are not very talented at all. The pie is an illustration of how wealth should be distributed. How do you think in an ideal world that respects capitalism, the pie ought to be cut? Here’s what 5,500 Americans said:

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Top 20% - 32 slices of pie
Second 20% - 22 slices of pie
Middle 20% - 21 slices of pie
Fourth 20% - 13 slices of pie
Bottom 20% - 11 slices of pie

That’s what people think would be fair. That’s the kind of world they think we ought to live in. Do you know what the actual distribution of wealth is in America if wealth was pie?

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Top 20% - 90 slices of pie
Second 20% - 8 slices of pie

Middle 20% - 2 slices of pie
Fourth 20% - 0 slices of pie
Bottom 20% - -1 slices of pie

This is what people's actual wealth is. It's hard to imagine in the kingdom of God that Jesus is going to hand out pie this way. Jesus brings good news to the poor. I believe that his people, the church, ought to be "good news to the poor" people. When people encounter the church, and they need food, the church ought to be offering food. If the poor are put away in some nursing home and no one is visiting them, the church ought to be visiting. People are getting off the streets and need to set up an apartment, the church ought to be helping there. And with the homeless. And folks looking to find work.

I believe that any group of people who claim to be followers of Jesus, in order to be worthy of his name, ought to be "good news to the poor" people. As I said, the whole world offers good news to the wealthy. Jesus and his people offer good news to the poor.

Jesus welcomes women. Jesus welcomes the poor. And finally –

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Jesus welcomes sinners

The whole gospel of Luke speaks about God's wide open arms, welcoming to himself. Those who were religious of Jesus' day at best marginalized and at worst rejected.

Let me finish with

Slide Luke 18:9-13

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Let me set the scene for you. Here is a tax collector, someone who is utterly despised - more so in ancient Israel than even by the Tea Party today - the tax collector. Its not just that these folks were reaching into people's pockets to pay taxes. In every age people have hated paying taxes. But tax collectors in the 1st century were traitors to the Jewish people. Do you understand what a tax collector did? Here is a person who worked for and collaborated with the occupying power – the Romans. He cut a deal

with the Romans. He said, “Hey, for a percentage of the take, I will join with you in strong-arming my countrymen.”

The tax collector was the equivalent of the French collaborators, the Vichy Government, who worked side-by-side with the Nazis. He is the person who says, “Hey, you know, I made money in the past under the French; I will make money now under the Germans. It doesn’t matter to me. Money is money.”

And then you have the Pharisee, the person who is absolutely loyal to the Jewish people and to the laws of the Jewish God. But something happened to the tax collector. Maybe he was at the party thrown by Levi – who we read threw a party for all his tax collector friends and invited Jesus.

Maybe the tax collector was utterly undone by meeting Jesus and listening to him at his friend, Levi’s, party. I can imagine the tax collector up all night thinking about his life, thinking about what an utterly disgusting mess he’s made of everything. He is pacing around his house. He can’t sleep. His conscience is killing him. He feels like he’s fallen into a dark well. He is drowning.

And so he decides to do something that is totally out of character. The next morning he gets up and he decides, “I’m going to go to the Temple, a place I haven’t been to in years. I’m going to go there for morning prayer because if I don’t get some help, I’m going to commit suicide.” He’s the utterly irreligious person who decides, “I’m going to church.”

So there is the crowd pushing into the Temple and there is this non-religious tax collector kind of dragged in with the crowd, very uncomfortable, wondering if people are looking at him, not used to being in a religious setting, not even knowing what to do.

And then the Pharisee goes to the Temple three times a day. He walks in and everyone greets him. He is comfortable and confident in a religious setting.

So we read:

SLIDE Luke 18:11

11The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.

In his relationship with God the Pharisee appeals to his track record with God. As I come before you, God, I reflect on what I have done and what I haven’t done. And you know, God that I have been trying my best and have been going to church. I don’t curse nearly as much as I used to when someone cuts me off in traffic. I am giving now and I have really been trying in my marriage. I have deliberately chosen to not date outside the

faith. I go to a small group and I have my quiet time almost every day. I have been praying and I have been reading my Bible. I even listen to Christian radio now and then.

What's wrong with appealing to your track record? What is so distasteful to God is not that a person has been faithful as if faithfulness means nothing to God. Or that going to church and sacrificing and giving money is just the same as not going to church and using all your money for an expensive vacation to Disney World. The problem with appealing to your track record is the notion that as a result of all that I have done, you now owe me, God. The unstated assumption of in light of all that I have done for you, God, in light of all that I have given up, in light of all my effort, you owe me.

You didn't keep your end of the bargain, God. Look into yourself. If there is any bitterness in your heart toward God, very likely at the root of your problem, is the view that God owes you something and didn't pay up. And if you believe God owes you, you don't really understand the Christian gospel which teaches that everything we have from God, every blessing, every answer to prayer, and especially our salvation is a gift pure and simple. He owes us nothing. We can never turn the tables on God and say "Why this or why that?" You owe me.

I want you to contrast the Pharisee's review of his track record before God with the prayer of the tax collector where he says in v. 13: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* Not, let me review my track record, but be merciful to me. The humble person never appeals to merit. The humble person always appeals to God's mercy – the tax collector understood the gospel. The only way I ever stand before you is mercy. Sheer mercy. The humble person comes before God and they say, "I owe my existence to God. The very way my DNA is arranged in my body, the fact that my lungs work at all, the fact that I can breathe, the fact that my kidneys work and I can go to the bathroom, the fact that I ate something and that I have clothes on, that I have a roof over my head, that I can take a shower – its all your gift, God. And the only way I can come into your presence, the only reason you answer my prayers is the gift of your Son and his death on the cross for me!

Humility says that if I am one micron different than I used to be, if I have stopped partying or if I go to church, or if I have forgiven anyone, or if I pray, or if I am doing what they aren't doing, it is because of you and your mercy God. If I see anything in me that is good, if I have told the truth where I used to lie, if I serve in inconvenience where I used to manipulate my way out of things, if I have hung in in a difficult marriage, if I have been courageous, it has just been sheer mercy, always mercy.

This is the person that God welcomes. This is the person whose prayer gets all the way up to heaven and doesn't bounce off the ceiling: "Be merciful to me." The person that God welcomes, the prayer that God affirms is "God, you have been so good in the past. You have been so merciful to me, now please be merciful again. Be merciful to my

daughter this Christmas. Be merciful to my mother. Be merciful to my friend during this season. Show me mercy again, sheer mercy, for no other reason other than you are a God who is rich in mercy. You aren't cheap. You aren't stingy. Father, you are a merciful father. Out of the abundance of your mercy, be merciful to me in this area. In my finances, regarding my rebellious child, in my desire for lifelong companionship, in the repentance of my loved one – not my merit. You don't owe me a thing. But out of your mercy, be merciful to me." That is the person who discovers Jesus' ministry of welcome.

Let's pray.

Jesus: The Minister of Welcome

Rich Nathan
December 15 & 16, 2018
Four Part Harmony
Luke
#FourPartHarmonyVC

- I. Jesus was a welcomer
- II. Jesus welcomes women
- III. Jesus welcomes the poor
- IV. Jesus welcomes sinners