

# Story and Meditation: Welcome, Welcome

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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10:40-42

by *Eric Anderson*

The young 'apapane was hungry. He was also lost. There'd been a sudden gust of wind as he'd been flying about the ohī'a forest, and before he found a tree to land in and hold on, the rest of the family had disappeared. It was dark, and it was wet, and, as I mentioned at the start, he was hungry.

He huddled rather miserably on a tossing branch high in an old ohī'a tree. He wasn't going to find anybody until this wind had settled down. He looked around for lehua in blossom, but this tree wasn't blooming. He looked for bugs, but they were hiding from the wind, too.

The wind settled down for a moment, and suddenly he heard a sound. It was the soft calls of young 'akepa. Moving toward the tree trunk, he found the hollow in the tree where the 'akepa had built their nest. Peeking inside, he saw two youngsters about his age and their mother. She was feeding them bugs.

I don't actually know if an 'apapane can drool, but if he could, this 'apapane was drooling. He was hungry, and those bugs looked good.

If you don't think bugs look good to eat, well, I'm with you on that. On the other hand, I don't think an 'apapane or an 'akepa think that rice or noodles or French fries look good, so we'll just have to accept that.

Well, he was hungry, and there was food, and he was hungry. He also had some skills as a singer, so he tried to make the same sounds as the young 'akepa. The mother looked at him.

He didn't fool her for a moment, you know. She knew perfectly well that he was no chick of hers, and that he wasn't an 'akepa at all. She could recognize a lost child, though, who needed some tender care.

He got his bugs.

As Jesus might have put it if he'd told this story, whoever gives even a mouthful of bugs to one of these little ones – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Welcome, welcome. It's practically the founding principle of the Church of Jesus Christ. Welcome to the tax collectors and the sinners. Welcome to the sick and those afflicted such that they could not control their own behavior. Welcome to the odd collection of Jesus' closest

associates, that group known as “the twelve,” that included at least four fishermen, Philip (who went by a Greek rather than an Aramaic name), a tax collector, and one whose nickname seems to suggest that he was an out-and-out rebel. Welcome to the women who traveled with Jesus or who sought healing from him for themselves. Welcome to the Syro-Phoenician woman who sought healing for her family. Welcome to the Ethiopian eunuch Philip met after Jesus’ resurrection. Welcome to the Roman centurion whose servant Jesus healed, and welcome to the Roman centurion whose household Peter baptized. Welcome to the Gentiles, argued the Apostle Paul with all his considerable force and energy. Welcome to the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted, said Jesus.

And, curiously, in this passage: welcome to the followers of Jesus who make their way through the villages of Galilee to teach and heal in the name of their leader, the workers multiplying the reach of Jesus and extending the message of Jesus: “The realm of God has come near.”

It is a curious thing, isn’t it? Jesus’ closest associates – the twelve but also a somewhat larger group traveling with him – had left home and work, family and economic security, to be with Jesus and to learn from Jesus. Now they had to take their own roads for a while, to represent Jesus to others as Jesus had come to represent God to them. They’d had enough problems during the time they’d been with him, I’m sure, to know that none of this would be easy. The instructions Jesus gave them earlier in chapter 10 are not reassuring. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,” he told them in verse 16, which is not a phrase to inspire confidence.

At the same time, he instructed them to sustain themselves by relying upon the hospitality code of the day. “Whatever town or village you enter,” he told them, “find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.” Rely upon the kindness of strangers. Don’t rely on your own resources. Be vulnerable.

Be very, very vulnerable.

Like a young ‘apapane lost on a stormy day in the forest.

Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, “We have a vulnerable God. Relationships, by definition, are vulnerable. By instigating a relationship with us, God decided and determined that vulnerability is at the heart of faith.”

Vulnerability is not fun. We begin our lives in vulnerability as infants, and what a grace it is that we don’t remember it. How do babies let us know they need something? They cry. Why do they cry? Because they’re uncomfortable. Because they’re wet or hungry or startled or frightened or so tired they don’t know what to do. They’re suffering. They’re vulnerable and they know it.

Our lives often pass through crises of vulnerability along the journey. The hurts of lost relationships, the grief of mourning loved ones who have gone. The loss of a job or the frustration of a goal. The trivial illnesses that threaten to work deeper – I greeted the turn of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a case of influenza that knocked the stuffing out of me and scared me a lot. Injuries. The chronic conditions that settle in and don't let go.

Who would want to be vulnerable? Yet Jesus asked his closest associates – his best friends in the world – to do precisely that.

Karoline Lewis continues, “When we start to imagine what it must feel like to rely on the welcome of others, perhaps then we will have a sense of the kind of vulnerability Jesus knew and Jesus lived. When you have to depend on another, perhaps even for a meal and a place to sleep, trust steps through that door first. When you allow yourself to be welcomed, perhaps that can be the first step to letting go of thinking you are not enough.”

Stanley P. Saunders writes, also at Working Preacher, “The vulnerability of little ones demonstrates that the mission is wholly dependent on God’s power and presence. The power at work in this mission is fundamentally different in kind from other forms of human power. Dependence is contrary to American cultural values, but dependence on God is crucial to the integrity and distinctive character of the alternative community Jesus is building.”

In this pandemic, we have now endured four months of community vulnerability, indeed global vulnerability, and the end of that vulnerability is not in view. We find ourselves struggling to find the hospitality that will protect us where we are vulnerable. We see others struggling with their own vulnerability. Some have lost jobs and income, and let’s face it, \$1200 didn’t go very far. Some continue to work in “essential businesses,” and their vulnerability is amply demonstrated in the demographics of who is getting sick and dying in the United States: it’s African Americans. In the nation as a whole, African American make up 12.5% of the population. According to the Centers for Disease Control, as of June 24th they account for 23% of COVID-19 deaths.

In Hawai’i, we are seeing disproportionate rates of illness among Micronesian families. Disproportionately, they work the essential jobs in the grocery stores and care homes and fast food restaurants. How bad is it? On June 6, Civil Beat reported that Pacific Islanders, not including Hawaiians, make up 13% of COVID-19 diagnoses in the state. They make up 4% of the population. We’re also seeing a disparity in Filipino families who are 16% of the population and 21% of the cases.

Welcome, welcome. Work hard. Get paid the bare minimum. Get sick.

Unlike those whom Jesus assigned two millennia ago to go out and preach and teach, we find ourselves on both sides of the welcome. We are the vulnerable seeking shelter. We are also the hosts who can offer shelter. We dislike the sensation of relying upon others – the American myth of self-reliance has had, I’m afraid, far too much success in changing the more community-minded foundations of Hawaiian and Asian cultures. We fear to extend aid lest we make another person dependent on us and – more to the point - create an obligation for ourselves.

Yet in the thinking of Jesus, those are the things that bring the rewards. To extend ourselves as vulnerable disciples is to receive the gifts of God that come to those who speak God's truths. To welcome those around us who are vulnerable is to receive the gifts of God that honor God's spokespeople. It is not *protecting* ourselves that brings God. It is *extending* ourselves.

Letty Russell wrote in her book *Just Hospitality*, "Hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis." She died long before the advent of this pandemic, but her words could not be more timely. Our hospitality may not be welcoming itinerants into our literal homes right now – it's a way to increase the risk of illness for host and for guest. But our hospitality should extend to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable as best we can. That might mean individual gifts. I am certain it will mean community action, all the way to the largest of our communities, our nation.

God is present with the bearers of good news, those who proclaim the closeness of God's reign. God is present with those who receive and honor and support those who proclaim it. God is present with those who offer healing and support. God is present with those who, on a stormy night, offer a wandering youth some dinner. God is present with those who stretch out their hand and present the little ones a cup of cool water in the heat of the day.

Amen.