

**Welcoming – a BAPC Core Value  
and  
Taking It In Before Taking It On  
Palm Sunday – 28 March 2021  
Isaiah 52:7-10 and Mark 11:1-10 (11)**

Several weeks ago, after the big Mission **Discernment** Retreat, I took it upon myself to **acquaint** you with the Mission, Vision and Core Values of Bon Air Church adopted by your Session. And I've been having a **great** time doing it!

Today, of course, is Palm Sunday... and in my little mind I thought that perhaps Palm **Sunday** would be a **good** day for us to reflect on the **Value – Welcoming!**

**You** know – *Jesus, **welcome** to Jerusalem! We're so glad you're here (and all of that)! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest **heaven!** Hosanna in Bon Air Church!*

It **made** sense... at least in **my** little mind. So, what do you say? Are you **game** for a little reflection on this Value? Would you **welcome** an opportunity to muse on it with me?

Bon Air Church (your **elders** agreed) deeply **values** *Welcoming*. They believe that welcoming is **central** to this church's being. It's at the core of its **identity**... along with a few **other** values. So, what **is** welcoming? What's it about? What's **involved** in welcoming? What does it take to **be** welcoming?

Well, I'd say: Welcoming requires some thought and awareness... some effort and intentionality on our part. Although some **practice** welcoming so long and consistently that welcoming becomes **like** second nature for them... like their ordinary way of living... still, it **takes** effort... some fairly significant effort... both within oneself and directed toward another. To **welcome** another, you have to **acknowledge** within yourself the existence of **another**... **in** his or her **otherness** from you. You acknowledge **his** existence, **her** presence and distinctiveness, the separation and difference between you. You notice it and, **in** some sense, you **accept** it. It's real. And **then** you engage in the effort of **including** the other in your life... making a **place** for the other in "the universe of you." And, in doing **that**, you likely realize, you'll going to be allowing that other's **presence** in your life to **affect** you in some way, to alter you somewhat, to effect a bit of transformation.

Say you welcome an infant into your life. Essentially you must do this on **its** terms. And surely you **start seeing** yourself **differently**. You **are** different. Your life is altered... **enriched**, let's say... because of this remarkable other. And you can be **sure** that the child is being affected, just the same. Welcoming is a transactional experience. There's never just a stranger on **one** side only. **If** I'm a stranger to **you**, **you're** a stranger to **me!** So, there has to be offering and receiving on **both** sides... give and take... as those who are **strangers** to **each other** allow **each other** into their lives, to some degree. **Both** will experience the effects, undergo some changes and become something new... maybe **even friends?**

When you **think** of it, **don't** you think there's probably a whole lot **more to** welcoming than you've ever thought there was?

You know, in my **limited** experience serving as a pastor, I've seen that **most** churches **think** of themselves as being **welcoming**. (Have you seen even **one** church with a sign out front that reads *A Truly Unwelcoming Community of Faith!* I'll bet not. Most churches think that they are welcoming. They **like** to think of themselves as **being** that way. And, to be **fair**, many churches do **try** to be welcoming... try consciously and intentionally... at least to the degree of being **polite** when meeting strangers... and sometimes event to the point of feeling and conveying **sympathy** for others: *O, we **know** how you feel. **We** were strangers in Richmond ourselves, at one time.* They **try**.

But **some** churches **succeed** in doing the **deeper** work **involved** in welcoming. They find ways to **acknowledge** strangers and to **accept** them *Just the way they are*, as Fred Rogers used to put it. They make **room** for others in their life, in their hearts... and **receive** what their relationships with **others** generate. They are willing to be changed, to be challenged... to be enriched and to grow.

Well, *Welcoming* has been identified as a **Core Value** of Bon Air Presbyterian. And I am fairly **confident** that it reflects your **determination** to work at **that** level... to be **welcoming** in that **deeper** way. I believe it points to a **commitment** this congregation has **long** demonstrated: A commitment to **being** welcoming of others... to making **room** for others... to being **transformed** through your **relationships** with **strangers**... to being blessed by **becoming** something **new** through the transactional work of welcoming.

Has Bon Air Church **always** made **good** on its commitment? Does the church never **fail** to express welcoming in this deeper sense? (Have I learned how to preach **just** enough and then stop? Not yet.) **But**, I'd hazard that **when** Bon Air Church **has missed** the mark, it has **known** that the mark was **there**... and it has known it is **meant** to **be** Welcoming. **You've** known.

And **so**, over and over you've returned to the **work** of welcoming; you've **asked** for and **gotten** the help of the Spirit; and you've **found** the **fruits** of welcoming coming up like flowers in the spring. So, you might say to another **Not** Welcome to our church, but do not change us. **Not** Welcome into our life and ministry; now please **become** precisely what **we** are. But, **rather**, you'll say Welcome in! *Let's see what **together** we'll become and do. Let's **see** what **God** has in store for us. Let's **see** in **what** ways we might **become** something **beautiful** for God. Lord, help us to **see** one **another** as **you** see **us**... and to **be** **welcoming** in **your** way.*

And with that, I'm going to **return** to the reading from Mark's **gospel**... and this time include a verse I left off. I'll start close to the end of the passage.

### **Mark 11:8-11**

*Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven".*

*Then Jesus **entered** Jerusalem and went into the **temple**; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

This **coming** week, this Holy Week, you and I will remember and rehearse the events of **that** week long ago... a week that **began** with Christ's Palm Sunday Parade and then ran its awful course... through conflicts with the authorities, a freighted final Supper with his closest disciples, a night of betrayal and a day of terrible suffering ending with our Savior's death... to **reach**, at **last**, the **promised** reversal you and I will celebrate on Easter morning. There was a lot for Christ to do, to **go** through, to **get** through **that** week. And there will be a lot for **us** to go through as well, as we **remember** all he did there *for us and for our salvation*.

Maybe its meaning will come freshly into focus for us. Maybe its transformational power will stir us, anew. Maybe our wonder and gratitude, our hope and devotion, will be deepened or reignited this week. Maybe they will! But, as we **begin this part** of our journey, **before** we go any farther on it, I'm fairly certain we'd do well to **follow** the **example** of our Savior... who, when he completed **his** Palm Sunday Parade, **entered** the temple, looked around at everything... **took it all in**... and then **left**, going off with his closest followers, to have a meal and to **prepare** himself and them for what he knew was coming.

Jesus looked **around** the temple. He took it **all** in... everything, everyone. He saw the sacred and the profane, the beauty and the ugliness. The schemers and the scammers... sinners and saints. The pampered and the paupers, the beaten down and the beaten up. Those who had hope and those who'd lost hope... and the many, **so** many, who didn't have a clue. He **took** it all in... and he **saw** the need... the great and terrible need... for **him** to **give** himself... the need for his life-saving ministry.

And, if you and I **also** will look around... if we will truly **look**... we will see the need for us to give ourselves, as well. If we'll take the **time** to take it **in**, to recognize **what's** going on and who's involved, we'll see why we are called to **care**... to offer up our own loving challenge to the powerful and our compassion for the overwhelmed... to give ourselves. We'll see **why** the gift of our serving is needed in **this** time. We'll see the polarization in society, the hopelessness and fear, the killing, the walls going up, the isolation folks are facing, the need for bridges, for caring community, for welcoming, for the love of God.

But, **if** Christ looked and saw the **need**, he surely **also** saw what it was going to cost for him to **meet** the need. And that was **important**... because Christ didn't want to get **halfway** down what was going to be a very tough road and start having second thoughts... start thinking: ***This is not what I signed on for***... and then walk off, leaving the job unfinished... leaving all who were **lost** in all the world **still** waiting... **waiting**, without even a **prayer**, for **peace** with God.

Christ took it **all** in, and he counted the cost, and he was determined... he **was** determined, with the help of the Spirit, to pay it in full... to finish the work he alone could do... the work of reconciling the world to God. Christ was determined!

And, in the **face** of whatever Christ is calling **us** to do now, you and I would do well to follow his example: Take off our **rose-colored** glasses, and count the cost. We mustn't fool ourselves about what our discipleship requires of us. But neither should we let ourselves lose sight of the

Holy Help he has promised us for doing our ministry – the Spirit’s help. Sacramental mercies. Christ took it ALL in.

I can’t **help** but think that the little **pause** Christ took **after** going into the **temple** was a bit like the breath a person takes before diving into water. If you’re going into a challenging environment... if you’ve got a big job to do, if you’re facing a great challenge... you need to **breathe**... to draw in breath... to be IN-SPIRED. Christ went **out** to be **in**-spired... and to **help** inspire his disciples... to help them remember and receive the Holy Help he’d promised. *Take it in*, he urged them at that table on his last night with them, when he offered bread and wine that he likened to his body and his blood. *Take it in – receive this soul-deep nourishment whenever you’re preparing to offer your own deep gifts in my name, your ministry of Welcoming others.*

Truly, something profound has happened in creation through Christ’s faithfulness and self-sacrifice: the reconciliation of all creation with God. And its effect continues to **unfold** in the lives of those who are called to follow in Christ’s way.

This week, friends, let us **take the time** to take **in** the story of Holy Week... to recognize the need for Christ’s mercy... and for ours... to count its cost... and to receive the encouragement we need now to walk in the steps of the Blessed One who welcomes us all and who gave his life that all might have life in abundance... who, therefore, we now seek to honor with not only our hosannas, but the fullness of our lives... the deep welcoming we offer. Let us take the time to take it all in!

### **Isaiah 52:7-10**

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

### **Mark 11:1-10**

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

(Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.)