

Scripture: Mark 6:30-44

Sermon Title: "A Wide Welcome"

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As some of you know, on Mondays throughout the summer, whenever I had a couple hours, you could find me volunteering down at the Wiscasset Area Chamber of Commerce Information Center on the pier below Sarah's Cafe, as part of my work in community involvement and engagement. During these hours, I would take my office on the road, work on things for the church, often beginning to work on things for the next Sunday, while sitting at the info center, and welcoming people to Wiscasset when they would come in looking for some information. A greeting of "Good Morning" or "Welcome to Wiscasset" would often get the conversation started as I came to know about where folks were coming from and where they were heading. We would discuss any questions that they might have (occasionally I had answers), with the most common question being, "Are there any public restrooms nearby?" I would try and equip our guests with some of the free resources we provided which related to their particular interests or to their destination. It really was a lot of fun to do this, meet new people, and ultimately strive to be a warm and welcoming presence on their journey, no matter where they were coming from or where they were going. To welcome was the ultimate goal.

One Monday, I was sitting there in the info center, working on picking out some hymn possibilities for the next Sunday, when a woman walked in. I said, "Hello!" but she did not respond. She went straight to one of the walls where a complete map of Maine was hanging with free copies of the map sitting beside it. She stood there studying it for a while and feeling that she was not interested in engaging in conversation, I looked back down at the hymnal and continued my work. A couple moments passed and when I looked back up, she was holding a folded copy of the map, something that we give away for free, and she motioned, with an inquisitive look on her face. A motion and look which said without words, "Can I have this?" I shook my head yes, she smiled,

and walked out of the building. It was at that moment when I realized that she was deaf.

For the rest of that day, I couldn't stop thinking about this encounter, wishing that I had been able to greet her in a more accessible way – welcome her in a way in which we all deserve to be welcomed. I wish I had known even just a little basic sign language, just the alphabet even to try and sign “Welcome!” In the weeks to come, I couldn't stop thinking about this meeting and this desire within me to work on widening the welcome I can offer because everyone deserves to be welcomed. So, I have begun a journey to learn some basic sign language. Practicing my ABC's. Learning to say, “Welcome!” “How are you?” “How can I help you?” As you can tell, I'm new at this, but I hope that I will be able to one day welcome that woman or another in the way that Jesus welcomes us. A welcome that meets us as we are and draws us in.

Whenever I read the story of the feeding of the five thousand, I'm always moved by the wide welcome offered by Jesus. A welcome that did not only draw the crowd in for a lesson, but a welcome that saw a need and fulfilled it. In the case of our reading today from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus first saw a crowd that was like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. And so he led them. Then he saw a crowd that was hungry. And so he fed them. The disciples, they were ready to send these folks away – have them meet this need to eat in some other way and on their own. To go elsewhere and get food. But Jesus reminded them that it's our call as his followers to live a wide welcome. A welcome that really requires nothing of the one we are welcoming. Let me say that again – I believe we are called to live a welcome that requires nothing of the one we are welcoming. They need not prove themselves worthy of welcome. They need not do anything. The onus to welcome, it's on us. Jesus did not look to the crowd to determine if they were worthy to join him in this meal. Rather he turned to the disciples, and called upon them to have a faith which welcomed broadly. Which served fervently. Which fed faithfully. Jesus called upon the disciples to have a faith that would

transform how they welcomed others, striving to live always the wide welcome of our God.

Beloved People of God, how are you being called to welcome broadly? There are certainly many ways that we can do this. Perhaps you are feeling called to learn a new language to let your neighbors know that they are welcomed in this place. Or maybe it's a call to feed like the disciples did or offer care and compassion in other ways to those around you. It could be that you are being called to deal with feelings you harbor within yourself so that you can look at your neighbor and embrace them with love. Friends, there will always be more that we can do to widen the welcome that we offer. This work is never done, but it is a constant response to the people around us who too need the love and grace of God. How will you welcome them? What are you willing to do to make sure they feel welcomed?

Today is of course World Communion Sunday, a celebration that was created in the 1930's and endorsed by what is now known as the National Council of Churches in 1940 as a day to explicitly remember the unity that we share. To think about the breaking of bread as not something that we are doing here in this place alone, but that when we come to this table, we break bread with people from different places, different cultures, people who have different theologies, different understandings of the world, people who speak in different languages and even celebrate this meal in different ways. Still today is about remembering this wide welcome! Remembering our unity in Christ. Remember the gospel of peace. For the love and grace of God are not limited to this gathered body, but are shared broadly. So may we all strive in every way that we can to live a wide welcome. So be it and may it be so. Amen.