

Welcoming & Receiving

Matthew 10:40-42

In 2013 Amy & I heard about a family in pretty desperate need of help. They were new to the area and at the time were living with a friend in a 2-bedroom apartment on Tower Road in Greensboro. The man had been unable to find work and at that time he and his wife had a 15-month-old daughter to care for, but their family was growing as the birth of their second child was only months away. Sadly though, they had hit pretty desperate times as they had no money, no food, no milk and no diapers for their 15-month-old daughter.

I'm not exactly sure what prompted Amy & me to see if there was any way we could help, but the next thing I know, we were in the parking lot of this apartment complex with our van full of necessities hoping to deliver them to this family we had never met. Maybe others would not so quickly respond the way we did, but meeting new people has never been something Amy & I have difficulty doing. But even this was new territory for us, because here we were, our van full of things we purchased for this family we didn't know, knocking on a door hoping to be welcomed. You see, even though we were the ones bearing these gifts, we had no idea if we would be welcomed, and the truth of the matter is no matter if you are the gift bearer or gift receiver, being welcomed, being received well works the same. We were strangers to this family and they were strangers to us, and as nice & generous as we thought we were being when we decided to go purchase these items, it is a whole different situation when you are standing in front of a stranger's door, wondering what would happen when you knocked. We felt so vulnerable in that moment, but I've often wondered how vulnerable our soon to be new friends felt in the moments before we arrived.

Luckily that first time meeting each other went well and a friendship formed between the Knight's and Hamads. A friendship that continues to this very day, and were it not for our ability to welcome and receive each other into very different lives, that friendship never would have occurred. You see, in many ways, Amy, Jason, Joshua, Jacob & Emma Grace Knight are so very different than Adel, Shaima, Rayon, Reel & Rawaa Hamad.

The Knights had been raised inside a fairly privileged world in America. Adel and Shaima, on the other hand, had been born and raised in war torn Sudan. Adel a good number of years older than Shaima had been forced into prison twice for holding a sign in public stating his opposition to the Sudanese Government

building a dam in his village. The second time, in the dead of night, he dug out and escaped from that prison and after running as far as he could, riding a donkey, and accepting a ride from a stranger, Adel ended up in Turkey. Upon arriving in Turkey, Adel went to the United Nations office and received the UN status of Political Refugee. Some 10 years later, now married and a father to 5-month-old Rayon, a UN official called Adel to tell him the U.S. has chosen him for residency and he has 48 hours to pack up everything he owns and get to the airport to move to his new home.

48 hours. That's it. When I first heard all of this I couldn't even wrap my brain around it. To that point in our lives, stories like the Hamads were the stuff of fictional movies at best, but all of that ended for Amy & me when we met them. What was once fiction had become real life right before our very eyes, and the more we saw about how unwelcomed the Hamads felt in their new "home" the more we didn't like what we saw. After the 3 months of "assistance" from the U.S. Government who, by the way, had chosen this family for permanent lifelong residency, they had nothing. No work, no money, no food, no real place to live. And even though they didn't know it at the time, Amy & I knew from that point on, each family would have each other. They welcomed us just as we were and we welcomed them just as they were.

Over the next few months, I discovered how inaccessible our public transportation system is and luckily found a car that Amy & I gave to the Hamads. Then we discovered that the house they were now renting a room in didn't have electricity or running water, yet their landlord (a fellow Sudanese Man who had lived here a lot longer and in my opinion, had discovered how to prey on the Sudanese Refugee community by renting rooms inside a house that never had running water or electricity) was charging them \$400.00 per month for that one room. So we began looking for new housing options immediately, as that current room was not fit for them and with the birth of their second child only a month away we didn't want this living arrangement to continue any longer.

One evening as Amy & I were picking up their dirty laundry to bring to our house to wash, dry & return, Adel walked out to hand us the last bag of clothes and as he handed them to me tears fell down his cheek, but he was wanting to say something to us. So he gathered himself and through his broken English looked at me & Amy and said he didn't understand why we were doing all of this for his family, and as tears started to fall harder he said, "No one, not even people in our own family, have ever treated us as nice and kind as you have." We all hugged and Amy & I

responded by saying this was the least we could do for them and we were honored to be able to do it. Now that was a powerful moment!

Then when it was time for Shaima to give birth to their second daughter Reel, Amy was at the hospital with them, and with the help of our children watched their now 18-month-old daughter Rayon until later that night. When we took Rayon back that night I asked if they had an infant car seat as they were set to leave the hospital the next day. I felt like I already knew the answer, and my gut was right; they didn't. So I put out a call to friends from seminary and would you believe within an hour a friend purchased a top of the line infant car seat and personally delivered it to our house.

That next day as Amy & I helped pack everything into their car, Adel looked at Rayon and while pointing in my direction told Rayon that I was her Uncle. Now friends, this is a huge compliment in most families, but I have since come to learn that in South Sudan this is one of the biggest honors one can bestow upon another. By telling his daughter to call us family, Adel was welcoming and receiving us into his family. Powerful powerful stuff.

Two families, who only a few shorts months prior didn't even know the other existed, had welcomed each other into their respective world... had received each other, just as we were and our families became bigger at the same time. Two completely different worlds, two completely different understandings of how the world works, found a way to welcome each other and accept the other just as they were, and communion happened. Stories like this, I believe, are only possible through God's Love being poured out from each person toward every other person. That is the only way I know to explain how a Sudanese Muslim Refugee family and an American Baptist family became one family.

You know, there are two sides to this whole concept of welcome. On the one hand you have those in the position of welcoming others -- into your church, into your home, into your life. In those instances, the one welcoming has the power. They get to make the decisions as to whom they'll invite and when. They can control the circumstances, the setting, and the surroundings. They are even able to determine when the welcoming will come to an end.¹

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4931>

There is another side entirely to this concept of welcoming, and that is when you find yourself as the one being welcomed. The one at the mercy of another.² Here's the thing, no matter what side you find yourself on, welcoming others or being welcome, vulnerability dominates, and this brief statement Jesus is making in today's scripture reading about welcoming and receiving is an indication that vulnerability is a crucial component of the Kingdom of Heaven, especially when vulnerability is understood as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure."³

Doesn't it seem that Jesus thought of vulnerability in this way. Who better than Jesus to know that in the end, to be human is to be vulnerable. To be human is to experience uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. Can't we all agree that uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure are at the very heart of humanity and divinity becoming one in Christ? If we can, then it seems that vulnerability is really a sign of strength, not weakness. Right?

If we truly believe vulnerability is a sign of strength then I wonder what we see when we look at the church today... its structures, its institutions, its seminaries, its leaders. Do we see a church who believes this, or do we see a church terrified to be vulnerable because of its perceived weakness? If you are unsure, just take a little time to watch how a church welcomes and receives strangers. You can rest assured that you will know a church's position on vulnerability when observing them welcome outsiders.

As New Testament Scholar Karoline Lewis says, "when vulnerability is misunderstood as weakness, the end result is a leadership foreign to Jesus... a self-absorbed, self-aggrandized sense of governance that does not inspire followers but requires an allegiance blind to empathy and hope." Such a self-focused leader is terrified of being uncertain, at risk or emotionally exposed. This was not the leadership style Jesus modeled.

By misinterpreting vulnerability as weakness it seems the church works against the heart of the Good News that God stands in solidarity with humanity and that all of creation has a fundamental need for connection, belonging, intimacy, and love. This is the only place we can find our strength, but we must be vulnerable.

Maybe in its need to claim relevance, the church chooses to avoid discomfort. Maybe this is why, for the most part, the church plays it safe rather than take risks

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4931>

³ Brown, Brene'. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012.

like welcoming and receiving strangers just as they are. Call me crazy if you must, but I truly believe we need to re-imagine what it means to do church and what it means to be a disciple if we are going to claim to represent the Good News of the Bible. You see, that Good News calls us to welcome and receive everyone. That Good News calls us to stop shaming people and start loving people... all people. That Good News calls us to uncertainty, calls us to risk, calls us to emotional exposure because that Good News calls us to relationship.

Somewhere along the way, we lost sight of the fact that God becoming human was as much of a commitment to vulnerability as God's death. "We have a vulnerable God and relationships, by definition, are vulnerable. By instigating a relationship with us, God decided and determined that vulnerability is at the heart of faith.

In the face of excuses and grumblings, disbelief and disobedience, refusal and rejection, God keeps coming back, adamant that reconciliation and renewal are possible, certain of love for us, willing to be seen over and over again even in the face of denial and betrayal. In the end, God had to trust in the welcome of the world to make a home here, to abide here, to make the Kingdom of Heaven be known here.

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 lived."⁴ When we have to depend on another, perhaps for a meal and a place to sleep, trust must come first. When we allow ourselves to be welcomed then maybe we can begin to think that we are actually enough. And who knows what might happen, maybe an American Baptist family and a Sudanese Muslim Refugee family become one family.

Wouldn't that be something! AMEN!

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4931>