

Willow Glen UMC September 1, 2013
"Welcoming the Word" James 1:19-21

A week ago Friday, I was knocking on neighbors' doors, handing out flyers. I wanted our friends in Forest Glen to know that we were having an outdoor worship service come Sunday. Now, to be perfectly honest, if it hadn't been for the fact that we were going to have amplified music and I didn't need any more neighbor complaints, I probably wouldn't have taken the time to personally invite them to our pet blessing. But what does that say? That it's easier to warn them than to welcome them. Wow. Why is that? Why is welcoming so hard to do in Willow Glen?

Do you ever walk these streets? Don't you love the old houses? As for me, I love their porches. Somebody ought to do a photo study of the porches of Willow Glen. I've always thought that there's something about a porch that is just plain welcoming: chairs for sitting, a porch swing, a stack of firewood, assorted flower pots, old sneakers. A lot of people

want to live in Willow Glen, and that isn't only because they're drawn by the old houses and old trees. I suspect that they also yearn for those old porch values: "Welcome, friend. Come, have a seat. Watch the world go by with me. Just made some fresh lemonade. Would you like a glass?"

We may yearn for the past, but most of us are living in the present. So we lock our doors. We close the drapes. We live in "communities" with cameras and gates. And when we move in, no one brings us cookies on a plate. Every day and in so many ways, we are made to feel not welcome but afraid.

Except Al and Dorothy Mauseh. They didn't get that memo. They are still welcoming strangers wherever they go. How do they do it? God knows. But I happen to believe that one of the reasons that Al and Dorothy can welcome the world is because they first welcomed the word. And that's what James is talking about today: welcoming the word.

When James writes to the Jewish Christians, his letter is filled with advice on how to get along in this world. He tells them, in our reading, to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. [James 1:19] Because only by slowing down, he seems to say, can they clear away enough space to welcome the implanted word that has the power to save their souls. [1:21] This implanted word is the Good News of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God.

So we need to welcome the Word in order to save our souls. But how? Well, one way to think about the process of salvation is to picture it as a house you have to enter. John Wesley used to compare salvation to a house. And today I want you to imagine that God lives in a house in Willow Glen, one with a very inviting porch. Picture it: It's dark and starting to get cold one night, and you find yourself standing on the sidewalk staring at this house.

Now, because it's Willow Glen and no one closes their drapes on those big picture windows at night, you can see right into God's living room. There's a golden retriever lying there before the fireplace and lots of old furniture and books lying about. Even though it's chilly, the front door is open and through the screen you can smell what's cooking in the kitchen. And you can hear music playing. It's your favorite song. So you catch yourself thinking, "This looks like home. I wonder who lives here. I'd like to move in."

It sounds crazy, but you discover that something is drawing you very powerfully to that porch. It is that mysterious force that draws us onto the porch of salvation that Wesley called "prevenient grace." It's the grace that goes before you and without your knowing it, begins to pull at you. Before you even know God, before you even know that you want to know God, God is lighting a fire in the fireplace, putting on a pot of soup, and making up a playlist just for you.

And almost against your will, you find yourself walking up those steps and then there you are, standing on the porch, thinking, "What in the world am I doing? Who do I think I am? I can't go in there! I don't know who lives here. What's more, they don't know me. If they did, they'd probably call the cops! If they saw the "sordidness" in my life, if they knew the "rank growth of wickedness" [James 1:21] that I carry around with me, that I have to deal with each and every day, they would surely get the dog to chase me away.

But never you fear. Wesley said that the porch of God's house is just the place for you. It's a place for repentance, for coming home, coming clean. As you know, on the porches of old farmhouses there were places to scrape your boots, hang your hat and a basin to wash your face and hands before you came in from the barn or the fields. Likewise on the porch of God's house. Here you clean the mud off your shoes, the crud

out of your mind and the scum out of your soul, before you go knocking on that door and asking for dinner.

Some of us spend a long time on the porch, trying to clean up enough to come inside. But even then it still takes a lot of courage to knock, doesn't it? In fact, it takes more than courage: it takes grace. Wesley called it justifying grace. That's the grace without which that door will never open into the living room of God. We just can't get clean enough on our own. And we can't open that door on our own. We can pound on it all day long, thinking that we've earned it. In Silicon Valley, we figure we're entitled to it. "Open up!" we say. But, you know, without grace, that door will never give way.

But when we welcome the word of justifying grace, all the sordidness we call sin washes away. Then it doesn't matter how undeserving we are, how sordid we feel, or how scared we've become, just the faintest tap on the door, and the next thing we know, we are stumbling into God's living room.

We look around, dazed and amazed, because it looks, feels, smells, sounds and tastes like home. It's as if we never left in the first place. There's the book we were reading, the cup of coffee we were drinking, the slippers we were wearing. We smile and the tears start to come when we realize that our favorite chair is still warm. This, this is where we belong.

Eventually, we notice that there are lots of other people in God's living room, all kinds of different folk living in God's house—young and old, rich and poor, dark and light-skinned, men and women—some we know, many we don't. And the really odd thing is that no one is arguing. No one is blaming or complaining. There is no fighting at all in this house, no screaming and no scheming. Everyone is doing chores together. Everyone is looking out for each other. And is it our imagination or is everyone singing? Truly an amazing place, filled with amazing grace.

Wesley called it sanctifying grace, the grace we need to be whole, to be holy. So, prevenient grace gets us to the porch. Justifying grace gets us through the door. But it is sanctifying grace that enables us to live well in God's house, to love all of God's people, and to serve in God's world. Now, I know what you're thinking: no one you know lives in that place. "Pastor, what you're describing must be in outer space."

I get what you mean. This sure doesn't look like my house. Even in God's house, we are still working our way toward holiness. So, it's obvious that not everyone can live there 100 percent of the time. We find that sometimes we can't live with some people or they can't live with us. That's when we need some porch time. We need to go back out on the porch because we're never really done repenting, are we? So there are days when we have to go sit on the porch and pray until we're ready to come back in. At some point, we knock again, but this time we know that the door will open and dinner will be

waiting for us. God will even make sure that they save us some dessert.

By fits and starts, then, this is how we welcome the implanted word that has the power to save our souls. Call it porch theology, thanks to John Wesley. I offer it to you at the beginning of a series on welcoming that will take us into October. So send me a picture of your favorite porch in Willow Glen and we'll make a poster. Meanwhile, those of us who are working on welcoming the word will talk about welcoming the world. Just like the Mauseths. I hope that we learn something from them, so I'm going to end with a story about them.

We were over at Woodhaven for our outdoor worship last week, and a woman with a border collie came to check us out. She'd been out walking her dog and saw the sign for the pet blessing. She told me that she likes to walk around Willow Glen and is hoping to find a house to buy here. Then she spotted Dorothy and Al, and of course, she had already met them, the

"mayor" of Willow Glen and his wife. They welcomed her and introduced her around. Bless them! I hope she finds a home here. I hope we all do. Amen.