

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Psalm 1, Mark 9:30-37
September 20, 2015
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We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, no hablo Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying, newborns, skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds.

We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli or like Joe, who can't carry a tune in a bucket. You're welcome here if you are "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail. We don't care if you are more Catholic than the Pope or haven't been in church since little Joey's baptism.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you are having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion." We've been there, too.

If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or who came because grandma is in town and she wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are tattooed, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts.....and you!

This is printed in the church lobby at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Community in Ottawa, Canada.

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

His name was Bill. He was in his early twenties and hadn't combed his hair in years. He wore a ragged T-shirt, which read "No More War!" on the front, blue jeans, and he was barefoot. He had become a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus was a church with a very well dressed, very conservative congregation. They wanted to develop a ministry to the students but weren't sure how to go about it.

One Sunday, Bill decided to go there. He walked in with no shoes, jeans, his torn T-shirt and wild hair. The service had already begun, and Bill started down the aisle looking for a seat. The church was packed and no one would make room for Bill to sit next to them. He continued to walk toward the front as people became more and more uncomfortable. When Bill realized there were no seats, he plopped down on the carpeted floor right in front of the pulpit. By then the people were really uptight, and the tension in the air was thick.

About that time, the priest realized that from way in the back of the church an usher was slowly headed toward Bill. This particular usher was an older gentleman and long-time member. He was a godly man, very elegant, with silver-gray hair and dressed in an expensive three-piece suit. As he approached the front, everyone realized what he had to do. How could you expect a man of his age, stature and background to understand some college kid sitting on the floor?

The congregation was completely silent by the time the man finally reached the boy. Even the minister was watching and waiting as he stood in the pulpit ready to deliver his sermon. Then, with some difficulty, the elderly man lowered himself and sat down next to Bill so Bill wouldn't have to worship alone.

Everyone was choked up with emotion.

The priest finally spoke and said, "What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, I hope we will never forget."

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

I hoped you all watched the first NFL game of this football season a week ago last Thursday. The New England Patriots beat the Pittsburgh Steelers. After the game, a member of the announcing staff interviewed Rob Gronkowski, the star tight end for the Patriots. He had just caught three touchdown passes in the victory. The interviewer tried to ask him about Tom Brady first, and later about his own success in the game, but he deliberately steered the conversation to the unheralded offensive linemen. He said, "How about that offensive line with three new rookies that protected Brady all night!" Superstar Gronkowski wanted to give them much deserved credit for the win.

Someone once said, "Always remember there are two kinds of people in the world. Those who come into a room and say, 'Well, here I am!' and those who come in and say, 'Ah, there you are!'"

This morning James tells us that "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

Finally, a story about unthinkable courage in denying oneself so as to take the last place in service to others. You'll remember the young, 26-year-old American woman, Kayla Mueller, who went to Syria to help the men, women and children misplaced by the civil war that has been raging there for several years. She was eventually captured by ISIS and is believed to have been accidentally killed when a bomb hit the building where she was being held.

It's been recently disclosed that, prior to her death, she tried to shield four Syrian Yazidi girls, also being held and abused by ISIS soldiers. When the opportunity presented itself for all of them to escape, Kayla stayed back because she feared that her western dress would arouse notice and jeopardize the others' chances of getting away to freedom.

In a letter from Kayla that surfaced only after she had been killed, she wrote about this incident saying that she had "formed a bond of love and support" for the other captives.

The only way anyone will know that we are Christian is if we display extraordinary love like Kayla, the elderly usher and the Catholic congregation in Ottawa, and when we can honestly credit others above ourselves as Rob Gronkowski did.

Several years ago, Juanita and I were browsing in the gift shop at the Williamsburg Lodge during a break at the Diocesan Annual Council held there each year. We saw and had to buy a framed and decorative colonial print that had written on it these words. "Give love when it is least deserved because that is when it is needed most." Maybe we should put that in our lobby. On second thought, maybe our sign out front, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You," is sufficient. AMEN.