

Whosoever You Welcome

(Preached by Cheryl Williams on June 28th, 2020 at Footscray Baptist Church)

Many years ago, in separate theology classes, we watched two films. One was called Babette's Feast, the other Chocolat. I wonder if you have seen either of them.

These two films are a bit similar, one set in Denmark, the other in France. In both, a stranger with a mysterious past comes to live in a tight night community, both communities are a little pious – in one the stranger comes to live with the two daughters of a pastor and in the other the stranger arrives in the middle of Lent. Neither stranger is welcomed particularly, there is a degree of mistrust. Both strangers are a bit different, quirky even, and get on with making a life for themselves. Slowly members of the community who often were outcasts themselves, begin to befriend the strangers and the strangers offer them warmth. The others begin to grow in confidence and find the freedom to do things they never thought they would.

Time goes on, disasters occur in people's lives but the stranger builds relationships, offers the welcome they didn't get to the community and changes the community. Members of the community are forced to confront their very selves, some of which is not pretty. In the end they become a treasured part of each community.

Maybe in this time of lock down you might like to check out each film.

I wonder when you have felt most welcome. When and where did you feel most at home, like you could be in your slippers and not have to dress up (physically and emotionally)? I once spent two weeks at a Children's Home in Bomaderry, New South Wales. I was meant to be part of a crew painting out the Home, in reality I just spent time hanging out with the young Aboriginal children. Meal times we something else, every one gathered around a big table. It didn't take long for the kids to figure out your likes and dislikes, one of my dislikes was peanut butter. I knew I was truly welcome, when at each meal time someone would ask for the peanut butter and of course it had to be passed around by me (even if that was the long way round), so I had to touch it – the kids would roar laughing and I knew at that moment I was truly at home, I was truly welcomed. The other time I have felt most welcome was when I led a bible study for some Persians. We would have a meal each week and I got to discover some dishes that would become favourites. Persians cook rice with some flat bread on the bottom that becomes crispy in the cooking, it is delicious. After a while they knew I liked that part of the rice (as they did) and I would be given first piece of the

crispy bread, they would sometimes give up their piece to ensure I had some – an honoured guest, a special guest, welcomed into that group in ways I still can't understand.

When were you last really welcomed?

Our very short reading from Matthew today is about welcoming another, about offering hospitality. The call to discipleship, to mission is about welcome and hospitality.

How do we understand hospitality and welcome? Is it a willingness to host, entertain and feed? Of course it is, but if we think that is all it is, we have not understood the gospel. In the Greek, the word for hospitality is xenophilia. Let's break up that word into its two parts. First – xeno, means stranger or immigrant. Philia is one of the words used for love, specifically brotherly (or sisterly) love. So, hospitality or xenophilia actually means love for stranger. Hospitality is about entertaining strangers, about making strangers our friends and neighbours, much like the two films I talked about earlier. True welcome and hospitality is not superficial, it is not mere tolerance. True hospitality and welcome might begin with a glass of water to the little ones, the insignificant ones of which Jesus speaks but it should result in out and out generosity to even those we do not know.

Hospitality is about family love:

Blessing instead of cursing.

Love instead of hate.

It's beautiful. Radical.

This is hospitality.¹

This is what Jesus calls us to. This is mission – to build genuine not superficial relationships, to welcome strangers into our homes and lives. To love those who don't seem to belong anywhere. To make people feel comfortable and at home with us – that they don't have to dress up but can be themselves, no need for pretences.

So, what stops us from accepting and giving such welcome and hospitality? Are we simply fearful? Are we suffering from apathy? Do we not know what to do and are frightened we won't get it right? Let's, just start with a glass of water.

¹ From sermon by **Benjamin Corey** is a two-time graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and current Doctor of Missiology student at Fuller.

Who then, might we be called to show such welcome and hospitality both as individuals and as a faith community? Is it the homeless? Is it asylum seekers? Is it the person who expresses their sexuality in very different ways to ourselves? Is it the person straight out of jail? Is it the indigenous person whose forebears have been more than hospitable to us? Is it the person with whom we really disagree? Is it the drug or alcohol affected? Is it the tax collector or today's equivalent?

Who will we share our table with? Whose stories will we listen to? Who have we excluded, whether that has been intentional or not?

Are we brave enough to have our expectations turned upside down? Are we like the communities in Babette's feast and Chocolat able to let the stranger get under our skin somehow and even show us the things we don't like to see in ourselves? Are we brave enough to be encouraged to try something new like they did?

⁴⁰ "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

I wonder what the reward might be?