

Welcome out

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When it comes to church, I'm a wanderer: I don't have a church home so much as a village of church tents. All this wandering has made me a connoisseur of church welcomes or the lack thereof. I can tell you where I did or didn't feel welcome—though I can't always say why.

I am beginning to get a clue, however, from my work as a hospital chaplain. Like churches, chaplains try to create a welcome for people. Unlike churches, we don't really have a place to welcome people *to*. This isn't just because no one wants to be welcomed into the hospital. Often we are trying to create a welcome outside whatever mess people find themselves inside. We welcome out: we go out of our comfort zones so we can meet people where they are, in their discomfort zones.

I had a really hard time with this at first. I put this down to being an introvert—despite all the great press we've been getting lately, it is still the case that meeting new people exhausts our energy reserves. So a job where I meet new people over and over *every day*—and I don't get to keep the old ones!—is kind of a special hell. ("Good," my supervisor said. "You can relate to people in the hospital. They are all in their own special hell.")

How, I wondered, do I create a welcome when we are all in the wilderness?

That's when I thought about Abraham and Sarah and that weird story about welcoming God out in the desert. (Genesis 18 if you want to brush up.) Abraham and Sarah are out in the desert, living in tents, and God shows up with a couple of friends. Out of the shade of a tent and whatever they have on hand, they bid God welcome.

Abraham and Sarah don't have much, but apparently welcome doesn't take much. You have to see the stranger, to move toward her and greet her. You have to give him some physical comfort and basic sustenance—to remain nearby, waiting, simply

being with him.

Notice what isn't part of this picture: a permanent building, a sense of ownership, a "safe space." Then there's the fact that *God* is the one being welcomed. Isn't God the one who welcomes us?

I believe God welcomes us, but I don't always *feel* that welcome. Just like I know God loves me—loves all of us—but I don't always feel that love. So in my work as a chaplain, I wondered if welcome is like love: we have to close the loop. God loves us, and invites us to love ourselves and our neighbors—and in so doing to love God back. God welcomes us, and invites us to welcome ourselves and our neighbors—and in so doing to welcome God.

God wants me to welcome myself? Have I done that? If not, I may carry a sense of unwelcome everywhere I go. There are a few estranged parts of me that I am not always happy to see or be around. But if I can't welcome the stranger in me, how can I welcome the stranger in you? And then how can I say I am welcoming God?

These questions have done some work in me. I've gone out to meet those parts of myself that have been wandering around in the wilderness. I am finding it a little easier to go out and meet other wanderers, to take a welcome to them.

I wonder what this might look like for a church. Too often my experience has been that a church at best tries to welcome you in, into its language and customs and insider ways. If we think of ourselves only in the welcoming role, we may not be aware of how we put the expectation on others to come fit in.

But the welcome we offer—like the communion table we share—does not begin with us or belong to us. What would change if a church knew itself first as a *recipient* of God's welcome, and then took that sense of welcome out into the world?

I think God's welcome looks something like that. God is always moving out toward us, pitching tent in whatever wilderness we find ourselves wandering in.