

A deeper welcome (Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42)

“Be welcoming!” Jesus says. Yes, we've got this one covered.

by [Liddy Barlow](#)

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In recent decades, hospitality has jumped to the top of the “favorite Christian virtues” list in many mainline churches. We boast of our open doors. We build wheelchair ramps and install listening systems. We hang rainbow banners, informative electronic signs, and “refugees welcome” placards in half a dozen languages. We equip teams of parishioners to pounce on visitors (in the kindest and least-threatening way, of course), providing them with name tags, fair-trade coffee, and a seat on the faith formation committee.

And so a brief Gospel excerpt like this one may at first seem merely to reinforce this. “Be welcoming!” Jesus says. We are tempted to nod and respond, “Ok, we’ve got that one covered, Lord. What’s next?”

But a closer look suggests a greater challenge still awaits us. “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward,” Jesus says. “In the name of” is not a common construction in modern English; a clearer translation seems to be simply “as.” To welcome a prophet as a prophet means we must fully recognize our guests’ prophetic gifts. We must welcome prophets *because* they are prophets.

And prophets, as the Jeremiah reading reminds us, can be tricky folks to welcome. This lection drops us in the middle of a prophets’ quarrel. Hananiah, a slick young

preacher, has teeth as shiny as Joel Osteen's. He shares an encouraging message. The exile will soon come to an end, he promises: the temple and the monarchy will be restored. His hearers feel good.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, baffles his listeners. He preaches desolation in joyful times and real estate investment in the middle of war. He is prone to episodes of doubt and despair. He pioneers performance art: just prior to this passage, he dons a yoke of straps and bars to symbolize the captivity of Judah in Babylon.

When Hananiah promises that Judah's time in bondage is soon coming to an end, Jeremiah is dubious. "Amen!" he replies sarcastically. "May the Lord do this." But what's more likely, he adds, is a future in line with the prophets of old, those who preached war, pestilence, and famine. The real world is hard, Jeremiah says, and no amount of smooth preaching can make it less so.

Hananiah, enraged, breaks Jeremiah's yoke from his neck. It takes Jeremiah a little while to come up with the right retort, but when he does it is chilling: not only does he replace his broken wooden yoke with a brand-new iron one, but he also announces that the Lord will strike down Hananiah, because he "made this people trust in a lie." And sure enough: within the year, the false prophet dies.

Welcome a prophet as a prophet, Jesus tells us. Jesus knows his Bible, and so surely he has characters like Jeremiah in mind. He knows that welcoming a prophet is not as simple as marking the sanctuary entrance clearly from the parking lot. Instead, we will need to recognize the holy in odd behavior and provocative symbolic fashion choices. We'll need to discern the difference between feel-good platitudes and holy hard truths. We'll need to accept what is right, instead of settling for what is easy.

This kind of hospitality is a hard and holy challenge. But if we can heed this calling, Jesus promises, then we will receive a prophet's reward: a glimpse of what is real in an era of falsehood, and the unshakable assurance that our own unclean lips can speak the very word of God.