

There's a popular salutation in Bavaria: *Grüß Gott!* It is translated as 'greet God,' which seemed a bit quirky to me: the imperative that another person to greet you as though you yourself are God.

As many of you already know, my family and I have moved back and forth from Munich, Germany multiple times for my husband's job. While I have always tried to be supportive of my husband's career, each time we have been invited to move to Germany, I have a hard time coming to terms with the reality that our family will have to unmoor ourselves, to start fresh, to once again integrate into a community where we don't know many people, find schools for our children, and find meaningful ways to occupy my time, which of course is in addition to getting residence permits, finding an apartment, packing the container weeks before the actual move...

When we arrived in Munich back in March 2004, I didn't speak a word of German (and still struggle to speak even just a little). I had just left a full-time job I loved to spend the next year or two as a full-time hausfrau; I said goodbye to my friends and family, and began a new life as a stranger in a strange land.

We have been blessed that one of the constants of our time to Munich is a family we've known since before we ever considered relocating there. Alex and Inge welcomed me (who felt very much like the proverbial little one) and helped ease the transition. They have been our family away from home. Their many kindnesses have meant more than I can say, and I am grateful.

As you may remember from last week, the followers of Jesus were cautioned about the cost of discipleship: following Jesus' call may require relinquishing anything that keeps one from being fully devoted to his work ... including the potential of having to give up important familial relationships. That's where we pick up this morning. Jesus is talking to the disciples, but the focus shifts to how they can expect to be received in the communities to which they will be sent. The reward of following Jesus goes not only to those followers who have left everything behind, but also to those who welcome such disciples, knowing who they are providing hospitality to and what their loyalties are. The transformative blessings of God extend beyond the community of the faithful to include those who act out of kindness and generosity.

The Germans, as a people, are delightfully quirky ... at least to my experience having grown up here in Southern Appalachia. For example, they never tell a friend goodbye. They say, "auf Wiedersehen," or 'until we meet again.' I've discovered that once you become beloved of a German, you are a friend for life, and there is no 'goodbye.' And I can say from experience that the next encounter is truly an experience of picking right back up wherever it is that you left off.

Another quirk is that when you're invited to lunch, it's not a 2-3 hour affair. *It's all day.* You arrive late morning and you leave well into the late evening. It seems so casual, unplanned, a sit-back-and-enjoy-yourself kind of day, but clearly they have planned multiple meals, done the shopping, cooked ahead, and thought of every detail (complete with backup plans) to pull it off

without making it seem like any big deal. We have found this to be true *every single time* we are invited to spend time with a German family. German hospitality is unlike anything I've experienced Stateside.

The central message in this short Gospel passage is that Christians are not the ones called to welcome prophets or righteous persons or little ones ~ the disciples are to be on the move, going out, leaving their homes and relationships behind, to do Jesus' work in the world. As such, they are the ones who are receiving hospitality, being welcomed, being guests of others. Even as the disciples attempt to influence those they encounter with their message of love, the transformative power of God's grace is active for both the newcomer and the resident.

I can't help but think of those in our community who are not English speakers. I know their struggle. It is hard to navigate everything from the grocery store to doctor's visits, from street signs to the flea market when you do not speak the local language. Calling a plumber to snake a toilet is a herculean task! As a (fairly well-educated) parent of children in the Bavarian schools, I found myself unable to help with third grade homework, much less advocate for my non-German-speaking kids. Even in Germany, a place that I have come to dearly love, there was no lack of "if you try harder to learn German," or its more transparent equivalent "if you'd just stayed where you came from..." It is so very hard. And can be terribly lonely. And I hear those sentiments here in our community – All. The. Time.

I'm struck that our church advertises with signs proclaiming "The Episcopal Church welcomes you!" The implications for that are huge ~ not just for those who are looking for a place of spiritual nourishment and fellowship, but perhaps more importantly for us as a community of faith. What does it mean to be a church whose identity is (in many ways) defined by its welcome?

Perhaps it means that there is a burden on us to engage in ways that don't always fit the paradigm of "this is how it's always been done", or with whom it's always been done. Maybe it means we must be willing to adapt and change to the varying needs of those who seek comfort, guidance and instruction from us.

Jesus assures us that those who welcome and serve the newcomer with compassion are seen and blessed by God. The Gospels are clear that we are to speak for others when their voices are unheard. When we have the knowledge and power to address problems, we are to work toward their resolution. We are to push back when another child of God is getting pushed down. This is how we practice hospitality to the stranger. This is how we who engage in radical hospitality will also get the disciples' reward.

Are we open to that kind of transformation and growth and change? Or do we subtly communicate messages to others that "if you try harder to fit our mold" or "that's not how we do it here"? Are we doing a good job of welcoming others in the name of Christ – as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, as a parish, or even as individual followers of Christ? In these last weeks, our core identity as a welcoming community of faith has not changed, but we have certainly had to adapt and change the ways we express that identity. As I've reflected on this, I wonder: are we doing a good job? How might we do better?

Just before each of our return trips back to the States, Alex and Inge would inevitably call and say they wanted to wish us one more in person goodbye. Each time, they would come to our house bringing some parting gift, along with a bunch of hugs and a hearty “auf Wiedersehen.” And so three years ago, as we were finishing our packing for our most recent move back to the States, Alex and Inge called to ask if they could have one more in person goodbye. They brought their kids, whom we’ve had the joy to watch grow up, enveloped us in a bunch of hugs, and gave us a parting gift.

They gave us a garden sign that we have near our front door that says *Grüß Gott!* I finally asked what exactly that meant, beyond a quirky, polite hello. It’s apparently the shortened form of the phrase *(es) grüße dich Gott*, “may God greet you.”

The wholehearted welcome we’ve received from our German friends has been invaluable and transformative ~ not just for us, but for Alex and Inge who continually offer it ... just as it was for the disciples and for those in their homes who welcomed them with warmth and hospitality ... just as our welcome should be for those who are strangers in our strange land ... and just as it could be for those who are already our neighbors but who look, dress, or sound different from us.

As we go forth into the world proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ, may we be open to God’s movement in and through the stranger. Whether we are welcoming or being welcomed, may each and every person we encounter be blessed through our respect of their inherent dignity, and may they feel treated with love and respect as bearers of God’s holy image. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” says Jesus, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”