

## “Guess Who’s Coming to God’s House?”

Matthew 10: 40-42

June 29, 2014 Lake Harbor UMC

What a joy it is to be here. I’m so stoked, as they say, and I thank you for the invitation. As some of you know, my last gig as a pastor, before retiring, was as the Grand Rapids District Superintendent. As the supervisor of lots of pastors and congregations, part of my responsibilities included reading the Staff Parish Committee’s requests for what they needed in their next pastor, should there be a move. So this morning I’d like to share a few things that I read from back then, about what congregations hoped for from their next pastor. Are you ready? Here we go:

- We would like a young pastor, preferably male, with a spouse and young children, but also with experience in ministry. But we request that his wife will be careful to fit into the church without making waves. We’ve run into that problem before.
- The pastor you send us here needs to have lots of energy. We’re an older congregation and people are worn out.
- The new pastor should be careful in the pulpit. We don’t need anything political brought up, especially that one big issue, because people will leave. People need to come to church to feel good!
- This one lumps all of the common requests together: We want to be assured that the pastor will be a good teacher, a good preacher, a good administrator, a good counselor, good with youth. Talk about heavy expectations!
- Finally, we don’t want our pastor to write letters to the editor. That happened once before with disastrous results.

Seriously. That’s just a very few of the comments.

Everyone, you see, wants the perfect pastor to come to their congregation. Of course! And the expectations are enormous and variable. But you know what I never heard? What about a prophetic pastor? No one ever actually requested, in my memory, anyone who would not only comfort the afflicted, but who would afflict the comfortable! What if a prophet comes to God’s house?

For is it not part of the role of any pastor to be prophetic? Here’s what I mean. Prophets are people who have a lover’s quarrel with the world. They love the world passionately, and struggle with the evils they observe. And so when a person is prophetic, they can’t help but speak out about what they are seeing, and they expect people to change or suffer the consequences. Prophets step on toes, doing what they believe is right. A prophet is not always the most popular person at the party. Will you encourage Pastor Mary to be a prophet, a prophetic witness to the truth, as she understands it? What a gift you would give to her if you did.

Right now, we have a good current day example of a prophetic witness in this world. When the Roman Catholic Cardinals met two years ago to elect a new Pope, they had the audacity, it seems, to ask God to lead them to a new Pope who would clean up the messes and reputation of the Catholic Church. They wanted a prophet, a man who would make a difference. That's the word that has now emerged from their then secret enclave. They actually wanted a prophet.

And so the Jesuit Priest from South America, Pope Francis, was elected. I am thinking that the Vatican got way more than they bargained for when the smoke rose up that chimney, announcing his election. Oh, the dust he has stirred up since then! Pope Francis is appalled by the ostentatious display of wealth in the church. Cardinals have already been sacked for living extravagantly. Pope Francis does not wear all of the splendid Pope clothing, or travel in fancy bulletproof Pope Mobiles. He is trying to model the simplest lifestyle possible. He stops motorcades to bless disabled children, and recently visited the Mafia heartland in Italy, meeting with a family whose 3-year-old son had been killed in a Mafia shoot-out, and then he proclaimed that all those benefiting from organized crime were excommunicated from the church. Talk about making big enemies.

There's more. Pope Francis had the audacity to invite the leaders of Israel and Palestine to the Vatican for an evening of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim prayers for peace, when 99 % of the Vatican was initially opposed to that action. (He said most eventually came around.) He is meeting with sexual abuse victims of the church; is calling for a legitimate redistribution of wealth because poverty is one of the world's worst problems. That bothers the people who have earned lots of money.

Traditionalists on the right are also upset that he is washing the feet of lay people, and women. Really. Shame on him. ☺ And Pope Francis dares to preach that love is the answer, the most radical message of all.

I don't know about you, but my husband Jerry and I often worry about Pope Francis' safety as he continues bearing witness to the light of Christ. Yet is this not the kind of prophetic witness that the church needs?

Hear again the words of our scripture this morning: "If you receive a prophet as one who speaks for God, you will be given the same reward as the prophet. And if you receive righteous people because of their righteousness, you will be given a reward like theirs. And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will be surely rewarded." The prophet's reward on earth can be one of troubles. The prophet's reward in heaven, however, is assured.

Which leads me to this question: how will you receive the prophet, preacher, teacher, healer, and pastor who comes to you this week? Our scripture is calling us all to radical hospitality. Will you expect Pastor Mary to be safe, careful, and perfect? Will you expect Ivan and their children to be models of propriety? It's a tall order to come into the pulpit in a brand new congregation and to look out over the faces, knowing only

a few, and wondering how God is going to use you, and if your children and husband will be welcomed, and whether you will find a sense of home.

For that first Sunday can be pretty intimidating. In closing, I'd like to share my own memory of my first day in this pulpit, as an example. I was coming off a seven year appointment as the Associate Pastor at Holland First United Methodist. I was so excited, and of course a bit nervous. It seems that I was to be baptizing a baby that morning, and I wasn't sure how to go about that sacrament in this new sanctuary. So anyway, things went pretty smoothly through the service until we got to the baptism. There was the baptismal font. And on top of the cover was a candle for the baby. I was trying to uncover the water when I knocked the candle over and it went flying. Then my sound system fell off my belt, pulling the mike through my pocket under my robe. And I'm trying to get the candle and find the mike hanging down by my shoes and fumbling with my book of worship. What a mess. People were laughing. My face was bright red with embarrassment. So much for impressing folks on my first Sunday.

Well, I finished the service and was shaking hands with all of the strangers whom I didn't yet know, when Kathy Lockett came up to me and said, "That was so funny." And I said, "That was so embarrassing!" And she said, "You know what I thought? She's human, just like the rest of us."

Talk about the perfect words of hospitality and welcome. A cup of cold water for the least of these. And now, a new beginning, as you welcome Pastor Mary and Ivan and their children. Mary comes as an ordinary human being too, with an extraordinary calling, and with far more than her share of pastoral gifts, to care for God's people and to give her life as a witness for Christ. You have a real treat coming to you. And so do the Ivanovs.

God bless you as you journey forward together! Amen.