Some years ago, I attended an Episcopal Church near an Army base. One of the things I admired most about that community was its ability to welcome everyone and its truly diverse membership. I admired its one-on-one outreach to the most vulnerable in society, which was done so that each person’s dignity was respected, his or her differences tolerated. So I inquired about the history of the parish. Had it always been this way?

The story shared was that about 20 years before my arrival (the rector before the one currently serving), a young woman came into the worship service a little late and sat in the back. No one noticed her until the time came for Communion and she went to the altar to hold out her hands for the body and blood of Christ. When she came forward at this most holy moment, several members of the congregation loudly gasped because it was apparent that she was a working girl, fresh off from a shift. Although, of course, the priest gave her the Body and Blood of Christ, she never returned to that church again, having heard the gasps and interpreting them as a sign that she was not welcome in that place – that she was not welcome at the Lord’s Table. The priest vowed at that moment that during his tenure with them he would transform that congregation into one where everyone felt welcome, especially the sinner, the most vulnerable, the least of these. And, with God’s help, that priest succeeded with that vow, the church transformed into a place of radical welcome, radical outreach, offering dignity to everyone.

God calls each of us to welcome everyone, especially the vulnerable and the least of these.

We gain a picture in our minds as we read today’s Gospel of Jesus setting the little child in the midst of them and saying that whoever welcomes a child in Jesus’s name, welcomes Jesus. Perhaps, you, like I, think immediately of our cute children and how easy it is to welcome them into our midst. But the meaning of Jesus’s action is deeper than that.

In that time period, childhood was a time of terror. Infant mortality was 30 percent by age 6 and 60 percent by age 16. Children always suffered first from disease and relocation. They had little status – they were on par with a slave. A wife’s place in the family was dependent on having children – therefore children offered no opportunity for gaining honor in this case, only shame. [[1]](#endnote-1)

In addition, children are always under the authority of others and have no legal rights. There would be no gain in receiving a child. They represented the future—they would carry on the family name, provide for their aging parents, and produce the next generation. But in the present, they were a liability. They participated in the household labor, but were not yet fully productive, and still represented another mouth to feed. Children were insiders left on the outside. And they are the ones Jesus commands us to welcome.[[2]](#endnote-2) In fact, Jesus goes even farther than asking us to welcome these least of these, but says that as we welcome them, we are also welcoming Him.

In this day and time, we can interpret Jesus’s actions with the child as telling us that we are to welcome and treat with dignity those who have no legal rights, who are vulnerable, who are sick, who might represent a liability to us in some way, who might be a source of shame, who otherwise would be left on the outside. If we take this metaphor into today’s society that means we welcome the migrants, the homeless, the sick, the needy, the vulnerable, the fearful, the addict, anyone who might take more from us than she can give – even that working girl that came into the church seeking to be fed as part of the community around God’s table. We are called to welcome everyone, especially the least of these, without regard for whether this person will help us or hurt us, just as we would welcome Jesus.

Leo Tolstoy’s story of Martin the Cobbler is about a lonely shoemaker who is promised in a dream that Christ will come to visit his shop. The next day Martin rises early, gets his shop ready, prepares a meal, and waits. The only one who shows up in the morning is an old beggar who comes by and asks for rest. Martin gives him the room that he had prepared for his Divine guest. The only one to show up in the afternoon is an old lady with a heavy load of wood. She is hungry and asks for food. Martin gives her the meal he had prepared for his Divine guest. As evening comes, a lost boy wanders by. Martin takes him home, afraid all the while he will miss the Christ.

That night in his prayers he asks the Lord, “Where were You? I waited all day for You.” The Lord says to Martin:

Three times I came to your friendly door,

Three times my shadow was on your floor.

I was a beggar with bruised feet.

I was the woman you gave to eat.

I was the homeless child on the street. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus is in every person – especially those who are vulnerable and look like liabilities to us. Jesus calls us to see His face in the least of these and to welcome them, just as we welcome Him.

1. # [Bruce J. Malina](https://www.amazon.com/Bruce-J.-Malina/e/B000APRY4A/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1) and [Richard L. Rohrbaugh](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_2?ie=UTF8&text=Richard+L.+Rohrbaugh&search-alias=books&field-author=Richard+L.+Rohrbaugh&sort=relevancerank) , Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Fortress Pr (May 31, 1993), pp 237

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Found in Synthesis. A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship in the Episcopal Tradition, PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc**.,** September 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From Where Love Is, God Is by Leo Tolstoy, found in Synthesis. A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship in the Episcopal Tradition, PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc**.,** September 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)