

GOD'S WELCOME MAT  
Genesis 1:24-2:3; Mark 6:10-13

I was sitting in the front seat of one of our Educational Opportunities Holy Land bus next to our Tour Guide. The guides we have had have been so informative about sites and customs, but I never expected to learn *this* from our guide. I was sitting back, with my right leg resting on the knee of my left leg, legs crossed. That made the sole of my shoe face our guide who was to the left behind our driver. “Pastor Jeff,” he began, let me tell you something that my father taught me and I have taught my son. Never cross your legs with the bottom of your shoe facing another person. It is an insult; it is a sign of disrespect; it breaks our message of hospitality and welcome to others.” “I didn’t know,” I replied. “Of course you didn’t,” he said. It is my job to not only teach you about the land but about our ways. I don’t want you to accidentally insult another person here.” Now, whether in Israel, or Palestine, or elsewhere, I am conscious about not crossing my legs to display the sole of my shoe. Customs are taught to make certain expressions have meaning.

With the insights from the Holy Land, I am looking again at Jesus’ words recorded in Mark 6: 10-12: “[Jesus] said to his followers, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” Could Jesus have described the action of scorn that my guide described to me? I think so, since Jesus added, “as a testimony against them.” *This is an action against unwelcoming persons.* Jesus was well trained in the ways of Jewish hospitality. He grew up learning about the great Abraham who, in Genesis 18, looked up from the tent where he and Sarah lived and saw three men outside of it. Instead of pulling out a weapon like some have been known to do in our day, he honored them; he even bowed down to them even though they were strangers. He said, “My

lord (lower case L) if I find favor with you, do not pass me by.” He was imploring them to stay, certainly for a meal, and perhaps for the night. This is classic Bedouin hospitality. Bedouin were people like Abraham, living in tents and traveling to find food for his animals. As our tour bus went by some Bedouin camps in the Judean desert, our tour guide stopped and got off the bus to greet his Bedouin friends. They were clearly the poorest of the poor, yet they heated a pot of coffee to offer to the travelers on the bus. Our guide politely declined, and we waved our gratitude to them. They would have given us—strangers—their last food or drink rations to show hospitality. I suspect our guide gave them a small financial token of thanks.

Walt Disney began to think about a ride that would put out a message of welcome and connection at the 1964-65 New York World’s Fair, and the proceeds from the ride supported the United Nations Children’s Fund. He wanted to celebrate that we are all joined together on the earth; he wanted his exhibition to bring a message of welcome and understanding. He began his thinking just after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis that really shook North America. So he started working on what would be called “Small World.” He put all of his Disney Imagineers to work to make a cute and cheerful ride through countries and customs of the world. The ride was a great hit. At the end of the World’s Fair, it was shipped to Disneyland where it opened on May 28, 1966. It also became a mainstay at the Magic Kingdom in Disney World here in Florida. On the ride, I’ve noticed the word “Welcome” with other words under it, implying the word is spelled out in many different languages. At the end of the ride as I read “Goodbye” I also read, “Adios” and “sayonara” and other ways of saying “Goodbye.” The song that plays was one that Walt himself asked his songwriting team—the Sherman Brothers—to take on. Walt said, “I need one song that can be easily translated into many language and be played as a round.” [Disneyworld.disney.go.com] Thus, “It’s a Small World After All” was created.

The book of Genesis gives us that message that we have just one world. Such a message has been offered to lift up messages of brotherhood and sisterhood, and messages of helping one another in broadcast pop events that have been heard around the world from July 1967 though today. How can we care for the planet; care for our neighbors; and show God we understand that the world was given to us to care for it; for us to manage and be stewards of it?

Today we imagine “one table spread throughout the whole wide earth.” Like the “Small World” ride, there are people invited who speak different languages and have different customs. Unlike the Leonardo di Vinci picture of the Last Supper with Jesus in the middle and all the disciples crowded around one side of a table, Holy Land scholar Bargil Pixner, who lived in that land, describes the custom of eating a meal like a Passover meal. Those at the meal, he says, would likely have food prepared on a center cloth, not on a raised table. Those invited would probably recline on the left elbow, leaving their feet stretched out away from the table for the hygienic reasons I’ve described. Their right hand is the hand saved for blessing and for eating. They would reach for their bread and reach for the cup in that way. They would certainly all drink from the same cup in those days. Again, they brought their manners and customs even as rough-hewn fishermen, tax collectors, and more. Some cultural norms went beyond trade or profession. When we lived in Arkansas we visited a number of families as their new Pastor and family. After each visit they’d say, “Y’all come back and see us now!” So one time we did come back to see them. They were surprised! What “Y’all come back and see us” meant was, “Goodbye!” Funny, I haven’t seen that expression at the exit of Small World!”

Today in these pandemic times, some customs are adjusted; some have stayed the same. We give out communion elements in plastic bags instead of calling you forward or passing out trays. That is just for now. One thing that has not changed. For most people at a dinner table in America, the custom when guests are present is that no one starts to eat until all are served and until a blessing over the food is offered. So here I will offer the blessing first, and then when directed we will be invited to eat the bread and drink from our little cups! We honor the directives for this Sacrament, and we honor the customs for our particular congregation. That is good; it is welcoming; and it calls to mind how many ways Holy Communion is offered today. Even though Christian missionaries originally went from the United States to many other nations, today in Korea we find the largest Presbyterian Church in the World, and many of the largest churches of other denominations are there! Imagine that; they even sing many of the songs we sing, just in their own language! Today, as we gather around a table spread throughout the whole, perhaps in some ways, it's a small world after all.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus: bless our meal today. Bless those who said "yes" to the invitation too. Set these elements apart from all common use for this holy use today. Thank you, O Lord, for inviting us and loving us. Amen.

Jeffrey A. Sumner

October 3, 2021