

Jon Hauerwas – September 9, 2018 – “Welcome to Westminster”
Romans 15:4-7 and Hebrews 13:1-3, 5-6, 25

Even prior to the birth of Christ, a scarlet-hued carpet has served to signify high status. Here in the United States, the arrival of president James Monroe from a riverboat to the shores of Georgetown, South Carolina, in 1821 was marked by the welcome of a red carpet. Since then, such displays have “become a standard addition to high-profile events involving political dignitaries.”¹

Still, “the origin of the phrase ‘red carpet treatment’ is thought to derive from the start of the 20th Century.” It was then that the New York Central Railroad offered an exclusive, express passenger train. Beginning in 1902, passengers were welcomed aboard with a red carpet, which also helped guide them to the appropriate doors.² Hollywood picked up on the tradition, with countless celebrities being celebrated with red carpet photo shoots in the decades that have passed.

But, if a red carpet is all about class and prestige, then why do so many congregations choose this color when adorning their worship spaces? After

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160222-where-does-the-red-carpet-come-from>. Accessed September 9, 2018.

² *Ibid.*

all, aren't we meant to rid ourselves of such mundane concerns? Well, let me put it this way. First, there are practical concerns to consider. For instance, if someone spills or drips grape juice on the carpet during the sacrament of Holy Communion, then a matching color at our feet can more easily conceal the stain and keep the space looking better longer.

But beyond the practical, there are a number of theological considerations, as well. For example, one might wear a suit or tie or a colorful dress to celebrate the worship occasion. In doing so, we may recall the advice of previous generation to "give our best to God." So, too, we decorate our holy space with that which is beautiful and pleasing. This, we believe, is a sign of our devotion – a visible reminder that we are called to give our best in service of God.

Or consider, if you will, how churches proudly open their doors to the surrounding community. No one is excluded. This means that a red carpet conveys a shared status to all. You need not buy a ticket in order to worship here. You need not be a dignitary, or a royal, or an Oscar-nominated actor to be treated with respect in this place. The most wealthy among us and the most in need will share the same pews, the same hymnals, the same Bibles,

and the same red carpet treatment. The message here is very simple. “You are a beloved child of God. You are welcome here. And we are glad that you have joined us on this occasion.”

In our first lesson this morning, we heard these words: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” And in our second lesson, we find this instruction: “Let mutual love continue,” and show hospitality to everyone, including strangers. These scriptures remind us that our exterior grounds, our shared worship space, and our classroom settings are some of the first ways that Christian welcome is made possible in this place. Each of these are visual cues of the personal touch to follow.

Thus, if you have mobility challenges, you may appreciate the welcome of a police officer who assists our members in crossing the street on Sunday mornings. And if you are a parent of young children, we hope that you are encouraged by the new language on the front of our bulletin. There are countless ways to extend our shared welcome. But, with each handshake, each smile, each word of compassion or encouragement delivered at just the

right moment, we become instruments of God's reconciliation, peace, and mercy.

My message to you today, on Rally Sunday, is this: Welcome to Westminster. Welcome to this shared table. Welcome to the family of faith gathered together for the glory of God. May you feel blessed through your interactions with this community. And whatever your hopes, whatever your fears, whatever your station in life, may you walk the red carpet with the confidence of a beloved child of God. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.