



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 4 Proper 8 (A)

Even One Cup

[RCL]: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

“And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” - Matthew 10:42

How long, O Lord? Although the psalmist’s plea seems to be echoing across our nation and indeed across our world, Jesus is still calling us to compassionate welcome.

Since Pentecost, our gospel readings have challenged us to think about mission. We have received the Holy Spirit, and now the question is: How do we move into the world to help bring about Christ’s kingdom? This is our third week in Matthew’s tenth chapter, where we have been reminded to follow the apostles into the world, to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, to move into the fields ready for harvest, and to pray for more workers. We have been warned that we will not be treated well on our mission and that it will create division even in our own homes.

Unlike Luke, Matthew makes no mention of the actual mission itself; we don’t know if the disciples went out or what their mission experience was. Scholars believe the omission is to highlight Jesus’ speech as a direct address to the readers. We are included in the audience – left not so much with an historical report of what occurred in the ministry, but with a description of its own ministry. As we end our time in this chapter, we learn that our role in the mission is not only as those who are sent out but also as those who receive others on the mission. The focus is on *welcoming*. Jesus uses the word “welcome” six times in this brief passage of only three verses and points us to the importance of hospitality in furthering Jesus’ Kingdom. We are called to consider more deeply what it means to welcome one another.

On reviewing the list from verses 40-42, we realize that this welcome can and ought to be practiced by us at any time, no matter what circumstances or crises we find ourselves in. We also come to realize that our welcoming does not need to consist of large, heroic acts. Any simple, basic acts of kindness we offer as genuine welcome for one another are all that God requires of us. All we need do is look around to see who is in need and try to do something about it.

This theology of hospitality perhaps reaches its fullest Christian expression in the final parable Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel – the one most of us remember as the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In that parable, Jesus reminds us that the way we treat those who are most vulnerable among us is, ultimately, representative of our response toward Jesus. Within the parable, Jesus refers to these vulnerable ones with whom he identifies as “the least.” So, Matthew's gospel, as a whole, reminds us that righteousness goes well beyond our relationship with God. Whether we are deemed righteous has a great deal to do with how hospitable we are toward one another, especially those who are most vulnerable among us.

As people of faith, we are called to promote compassionate welcome that motivates us to trust, to be open, and to share. At the same time, we need to exercise caution to avoid manipulating others and seeking personal gain. We set out with good intentions to form caring relationships, yet when left to our own devices, we sometimes fall short of creating and sustaining the kind of relationships that help us to become the people God has called us to be. Often times, pride, ego, self-doubt, hopelessness, and other sentiments get in the way and keep us from truly connecting with each other, except in self-interested ways. We need God's grace to help us with living into compassionate welcome with one another and extending genuine hospitality.

Members of early Christian communities were called “little ones,” and regardless of their origin, the disciples of Jesus were encouraged to identify themselves with the little ones in the world, who in turn, are called to serve other such little ones. Our efforts to welcome and love the little ones are important because Jesus sees it and receives it as worship. When we love the little ones, we love Jesus. In welcoming one another into our hearts, Jesus tells us that we are welcoming him into our hearts — welcoming God into our hearts. It's the old paradox, that it is in giving that you receive. It is in losing your life that you find it. It is in welcoming others that you experience Jesus' welcome.

Friends, like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but strengthen the relationships that are most important to us, the life of faith is also made up of many small gestures – gestures like making a phone call to ask how a friend or stranger is doing, dropping off groceries for the elderly, reaching out to the lonely and most vulnerable among us. According to Jesus, there is no small gesture. A cup of cold water is the smallest of gifts – a gift that almost anyone can give. But a cup of cold water is precious to a person who is really thirsty – in some instances, the gift of life itself. In the game of life, while we might prefer to be the quarterback – the hero – it seems that Jesus' heart leans towards the water-boy or water-girl. Jesus does not specify the nature of the reward for those who help little ones, but in the kingdom of God, the smallest service brings with it eternal reward for the giver.

When poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was sent to prison in 1895, it was the ultimate humiliation for him. In his day, he was a real celebrity, but all that evaporated once he was convicted. Whenever the prison authorities moved him in public, he was spat at and jeered. On one occasion, when the crowd was particularly hostile, a friend of Wilde appeared and made a simple gesture of friendship and respect that silenced the crowd. What was this simple gesture? As Wilde passed by, handcuffed and looking at the

ground, the man simply raised his hat to him, the smallest of good deeds.

Later, Wilde wrote, “The memory of that lowly silent act of Love has unsealed for me all the wells of pity, made the desert blossom like a rose, and brought me out of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken and great heart of the world.”

The smallest of good deeds: a little thing done in love. The cup of cold water is the symbol of that. It doesn't take much to be hospitable, welcoming, and accepting of other people. A cup of cold water replicated in a host of other simple, small deeds. And Jesus tells us that every single one of those small deeds is important – even eternally significant. It doesn't take much; every one of us can achieve these things, and every one of us can make that difference. We can find God in those smallest of good deeds.

My sisters and brothers, the roles of those who welcome and those being welcomed are interchangeable. We are all called to be Christ to each other. Jesus sends us to share the Good News, alleviate human suffering, to meet real needs, to work miracles of love and healing through acts of kindness... cups of water. We are called to remember that we, too, are to go as people willing to receive those same acts of kindness. When we welcome one another, we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us.

Whoever gives you even a cup of cold water... will most definitely not lose their reward.

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