



Proper 8 / A 28 June 2020

Just One Cup of Water

Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

“How long, O Lord; how long? ... How long shall I have perplexity in my mind, and grief in my heart, day after day?”

The ancient psalmist’s plea seems to be on many lips these days, echoing across our nation, and indeed around our world. Yet, even as our attention is focused on both the ongoing pandemic, with the daily statistics of increasing COVID infections and deaths and hot spots, and yellow and green phase implementations ... even as our focus rests on these days of national unrest and civil dissonance, the long-overdue need for finally addressing the systemic racism that plagues our country, and urgent calls for equal justice before the law, policing and incarceration reform ... even amidst all this, Jesus still calls us to live lives not defined by fear, nor anxiety, nor restraint, but lives of compassionate welcome.

Since The Great Feast of Pentecost, a month ago, our weekly Gospel readings have challenged us not to think solely about our own withdrawal, quarantine and isolation, but about stepping out in mission and ministry to others. Like Jesus’ twelve chosen apostles, we have

been chosen to receive that same Holy Spirit; and now the question is not what did they do, but how do we move into the world to help bring about Christ's kingdom? This is our third week in Matthew's tenth chapter, the entire chapter devoted to the call of being a disciple, answering the call to follow Jesus. For the past three Sundays, the Gospel has reminded us to follow those first twelve disciples into the world. Like them, we have been called to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed to our own generation, to move into the fields still ready for harvest, and to pray for more workers to join us. We have been fairly and accurately warned that we will not always be welcomed or treated well on our mission, and that it may well create division even within our own families and among our closest friends.

Unlike Luke, Matthew gives no accounting of the apostles' actual mission itself; we don't know if the disciples actually went out, what their mission experience was, how they were received. Biblical scholars believe Matthew's omission is done deliberately to highlight Jesus' speech as a direct address to us, the readers. We are the intended audience – left not so much with an historical report of what occurred in the apostles' ministry 2,000 years ago, but with an invitation and description of our own call to follow Jesus into our own contemporary ministries, our own current mission fields. In these final three verses, as we end our time in this chapter, we learn that there are always two sides to any ministry: our role in the mission is not only as those who are sent out, those who give; but also as those who receive from others as they answer their call, and go about their mission. As this tenth chapter of Matthew closes, 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 truly reach out in love, and faithfully welcome one another.

On reviewing these verses, 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 act of kindness we can offer as genuine welcome for one another is all that God requires of us. All we need do is keep our eyes open, look around to see who is in need, and try to do something about it.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, we are reminded that righteousness goes well beyond our relationship with God. Whether we are deemed as righteous has a great deal to do with how hospitable we are toward others, especially those who are most vulnerable among us – a lesson equally as important for today as it was in Jesus' day. As people of faith, we are called to promote compassionate welcome that motivates us to trust, to be open, and to share. We need God's grace to help us with living into compassionate welcome with one another and extending genuine hospitality in Christ's name.

Members of early Christian communities were called "little ones," and the disciples of Jesus were encouraged to identify themselves with the "little ones" in the world, who in turn, are then called to serve other such "little ones." Our efforts to welcome and love the "little ones" within our society are important because Jesus sees our actions, knows our motivations, and receives it as worship. Simply put, when we recognize and love the "little ones" around us, we recognize and 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.

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 and the needy in the community, reaching out to the lonely and most vulnerable among us. According to Jesus, there is no such thing as a small, insignificant 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, and a great gift, to a person who is thirsty – in some instances, a cup of water can be the gift of life itself. In the game of life, while we might prefer to be the quarterback – the hero – the one in the spotlight - it seems that Jesus' heart always opens to the lowly water-boy or water-girl, the one usually relegated to the background, the one most often in the shadows. Jesus does not specify the nature of the reward for those who help “little ones,” but in the Kingdom of God, even the smallest act of 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 quite well-known, a true celebrity, but all that evaporated once he was convicted of being a homosexual, a felony in England at that time. Whenever the prison authorities moved him from one prison to another through the city streets of London, he was heckled, spit upon, 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 shackled in an open cart, the man simply raised his hat to him, the smallest of good deeds.

Later, Wilde wrote these words about that day: “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, a simple gesture, given in love. A 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 symbolizes any action, 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 give God's compassion, and receive God's grace, in even 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 small acts of kindness... cups of water. And 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 – in both giving and receiving, we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us.

Whenever you give even the smallest gesture of love, even a cup of cold water, you gain your reward in heaven. And whoever gives you even a cup of cold water will most definitely not lose their reward.

In this season of viral pandemic and national unrest, many of us are unclear how to faithfully respond, unclear of what we are called to do. At such a time, let us remember that even the offer of a cup of cold water is a great gift, and for that assurance, we can joyfully say: Amen.