

A CUP OF COLD WATER

[Jesus said] “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 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 10:40-42

There has been much discussion and hand-wringing in wide-ranging circles, for many years now, about the lack of civility in American public discourse. And even though some of us thought that something like a pandemic might possibly bring us closer together in a common effort to overcome this national crisis, it seems that just the opposite has been the reality. It seems that the vitriol and anger and threats of violence have ramped up even more. As I have pointed out before, there are some who worry that our fragile social fabric is being stretched to the breaking point and is in real danger of unravelling in ways that will be hard to restore.

The covid-19 virus seems to have another variant, and it’s not just Delta. There seems to be a strain of meanness and lack of concern for each other that is also going viral.

And then we read in today’s gospel lesson about this simple, gracious gesture—offering someone a cup of cold water. It seems so far removed from the ethos of contemporary culture as to be irrelevant, or at best naïve. It certainly doesn’t reflect the kind of “fire-in-the-belly” competitive drive you need to win a political campaign or defeat your enemies in the “real world.” It’s probably not a very good strategy for getting your product or services noticed, to capture a market share and knock off your competitors. It is about as far as you can get from the notion that the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. Giving and receiving a small good thing like a cup of cold water—it seems like such a simple and insignificant gesture. But it seems to me that this is a large part of what this passage is about.

These verses we read are the culmination of a larger passage in which Jesus is sending his disciples out into the world to take up the ministry that he has been engaged in himself, to take the message of the gospel out to where people are, to heal the sick, to welcome the outcasts into the community. You might think of this as a half-time, locker-room, pep-talk. But he is not sending the disciples out to win one for the Gipper. And even though he has a game plan that includes healing, and reconciling, and being neighbor to those in need, he is not sending them out just to do good things for others. Even more than that he is sending them out to hold up a vision of how things can be in the world, to offer an alternative to the demeaning and de-humanizing forces that are often at work in society.

And this motivational talk is wrapped up with these verses that we read today, in which Jesus makes the connection between the mission of disciples and the activity of God in the world. In a variation on the theme we considered last week in our reading of Matthew 25, Jesus tells them that whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and by extension welcomes the God who sent me. Paul Hanson, in an article written on the identity and purpose of the church, puts it this way: “According to a biblical understanding of what it means to be God’s people, the church is to be present in the world [in the same way that] God is present in the

world, that is, creatively and redemptively, and as an agent of healing.” (*Theology Today*, vol. 43, no. 3, Oct. 1985, p. 346)

We are called, as followers of Christ, to bear witness to God’s purposes for this world, to an alternative way of living. We are called to bear witness to a life and a society that is rooted not in triumph and gloating victory over others but in empathy, compassion, and mutuality. In these verses from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is making a clear link between being welcomed as God’s co-workers and this simple, gracious gesture of giving and receiving a cup of cold water.

Now, you may be like me and just always assumed that this instruction about giving a cup of water was about being generous and charitable to those in need. I had always understood this as an image of those of us who were fortunate enough to have possession and control of abundant resources giving at least a meager portion to those less fortunate, those who in their poverty and need turn to us.

But it turns out that I had it all backwards. When Jesus says that “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones,” it is the disciples who are the recipients. Those who are sent out in Jesus’ name—we are the little ones that are received with this gracious gesture. We are not the benevolent givers who are sharing out of our abundance; we are participants and equal partners in a gesture of grace. And it turns out that the image as Matthew intended is a much more powerful image of what compassion means.

Robert McAfee Brown, in his book *Speaking of Christianity*, explains that the root meaning of “compassion” comes from two Latin terms, *cum-passio*, and it means “to suffer with,” or “to suffer alongside the other,” “to enter into and share the condition of another.” He points out that while some dictionaries offer “pity” as a synonym, he considers compassion as something different and stronger, “for it often involves action on behalf of the other, which is rooted in closeness, rather than some abstract kind of concern that is manifested at a distance.” (*Speaking of Christianity*, p. 67)

What would it look like, to share a cup of cold water in such a way that it doesn’t separate us into powerful and privileged givers and poor and helpless receivers? What would it look like to embrace the kind of compassion that fosters closeness and allows us to walk alongside our neighbors?

Anna Carter Florence, who teaches preaching at Columbia Seminary, in Atlanta, tells about one of her students, Steve Andrews:

“Steve is part of a group of students who get up at 5:45 a.m. on Monday mornings to go serve breakfast at The Open Door in downtown Atlanta. The Open Door is a community of hospitality that serves the homeless with meals, clothes, showers, and other services that are hard to come by, on the street.

“Steve notes that there are a number of churches and social agencies in Atlanta who serve meals to the homeless—thousands of meals, every day. These ministries are run by faithful and loving people who genuinely want to give in Jesus’ name. But they also tend to divide the giver and receiver by placing a physical barrier between them: the buffet counter. Those who come to serve stand on one side of the barrier with aprons and spoons, dishing out portions of food. Those who come to eat stand on the other side of the barrier with plates, moving slowly down the line. The only encounter between the parties is the moment when the server’s spoon touches the diner’s plate; there is hardly any need for touch, talk, or even eye contact. One could feasibly stand on either side of this barrier all day long, and never communicate with another soul. So while these faithful ministries certainly manage to serve a

great number of people . . . they do it at a cost. Those being served are reduced to 'automatons,' as Steve put it, moving through the assembly line. There isn't much opportunity for transformation; the ministry just fills a need . . . and then fills it again, over and over."

But she explains how serving breakfast at The Open Door is different. When you enter the dining room, you don't see a buffet line but rather tables where people sit family style. She says, "Servers bring platters of eggs and grits, coffee and oranges, and then they bring refills, as many as you like. No one tells you to get up from the table before you're ready. No one asks you to move along. The assumption is you are here for the meal, and you are welcome. Servers and guests have space and time for conversation, and because the same faces tend to show up day after day, week after week, friendships form. You want to know how Ben is feeling. You want to hear how Lou's daughter is doing in college. You want to ask what Jerome is reading, this week. These kinds of relationships are possible because the *space* is created for them."

What Jesus is talking about in Matthew's gospel is not just about the generosity and charity of those who have much to give. It is first of all, about entering into and sharing the condition of others. It is about recognizing that we are all the little ones.

The Matthew 25 Invitation is about more than slogans and campaigns around hot button issues like racism and poverty. It has as much to do with how we offer and how we receive a cup of cold water.

Anna Carter Florence asks: "If Jesus were coming to breakfast tomorrow, what would you hope might happen? How would you set up the space? Would you want to serve him quickly and efficiently so he could be up and out and about his father's business? Would you want to serve him lavishly and impressively so he would remember the food as among the best he ever tasted? Would you want to serve him simply so there would be time for you to linger around the table, talking over a second or third cup of coffee? Would you be so intimidated by the greatness of his presence that you would hover in the kitchen doorway, only entering to refill his cup?" These are important questions, she says, because whenever you welcome someone for breakfast, "you welcome Jesus, and when you welcome Jesus you welcome the One who sent him." (*Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2008)

Giving and receiving a cup of cold water. A simple, gracious, and two-way gesture that, if we really believe the gospel, has more transforming power than any political, social, economic, or military force at work in the world today. Are we ready to receive that cup of cold water?

Paul Collier
First Presbyterian Church
Mason City, Iowa

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