

August 4, 2019
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

First Presbyterian Church
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A CUP OF COMPASSION

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus, as always, is saying something very deep and challenging through simple everyday images. When he invites us to offer water, He is inviting us to understand what true thirst is, and where it lies. We, who have been fooled into thinking we are thirsty for more stuff, or for more power, or for more security, are taken to school by Jesus Christ who teaches us what true water is. Water is a metaphor for something greater.

This section focuses on the word, "welcome." The word, "welcome," is mentioned six times within two verses. This section also focuses on the word, "reward." The word, "reward," is mentioned three times. "Reward" is a technical business term in the Greek language and means "payment in full."

40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 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; 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."

Prayer for Illumination

Lord God, may the doors of our hearts be wide enough to welcome all who need human love and fellowship and Your divine care; but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and lack of love. Here may the tempted find help, the sorrowing receive comfort, the careless be awakened to repentance, and the penitent be assured of your mercy; and here may all your children renew their strength and go on their way in hope and joy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In a very deep way, this simple verse from Matthew's Gospel can become a way of framing our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus had just instructed the disciples on the major objectives in carrying out his earthly mission. They were grand and impressive. Things like

casting out demons, healing the sick, cleansing lepers... Jesus at the same time challenged them to be aware of every human need through simple, small, single acts of conscientious concern, care, and compassion. Elaine Pagels says, "Jesus' words are the basis for a radical new social situation based on the value and dignity of every human being"[i]

LITTLE THINGS

The well-known preacher Ralph Sockman said "Life isn't a little bundle of big things; it's a big bundle of little things." Or as the prose found on a plaque in my study reads, "He on whom God's light does fall sees the great things in the small." (Piet Hein)

Russian novelist Tolstoy writes of an encounter with a beggar. Tolstoy searched his pockets for a coin but could find none. He said to the beggar, "I'm sorry, my brother, but I don't have any money on my person." The beggar's melancholy expression was transformed into a grateful smile, as he said, "You have given me more than I asked for. You have called me brother." A cup of compassion.

Such gestures caused Poet William Wordsworth to laud: "that best portion of a good (Person's) man's life: (Are) his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love." This is the concept our Lord Jesus Christ conveyed to his followers.

COMPASSION

The etymology of "compassion" comes from the Latin for "co-suffering" – or "feeling for another." In an era of endemic, caustic, toxic incivility, compassion seems like a lost or forgotten endeavor. Dr. David O. Woodyard in his book *To Be Human Now* speaks of "the state of dispassion" in our world today. He says, "The dispassionate person immunizes (his) feelings against what is happening to others."

In his book, *The Passionate State of Mind*, Eric Hoffer said: "In the chemistry of (a person's) [man's] soul, almost all noble attributes - courage, honor, hope, faith, duty, loyalty, etc. - can be transmuted into ruthlessness. Compassion alone stands apart from the continuous traffic between good and evil proceeding within us."

Sometimes we forget how elegantly simple New Testament Christianity is. It is those little acts of compassion that the Christian life summons forth from us. Every person is thirsty. Everyone you encounter has some hurt they wish would be healed. Have you shared a cup of cold water from the fountain of the living Christ?

Through Christ we have the ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. The commonplace and our common acts can be sacramental. The ordinary can be consecrated. The otherwise trivial can become the turnstile for the motion and movement of God's Grace in creation. The otherwise insignificant holds the potential, the latent possibility, for becoming a blessing. The everyday around which we build our lives, the minute details that fill our waking hours, our endless routines and the countless rituals to which we give ourselves, may become vessels spilling over with the abundant and full, the beautiful and creative compassion of Christ for a thirsting world. There is nothing which our hands touch, to which our time is given, or in which our energy is invested that can be exempted from God's work of healing and reconciling.

The Holy is hidden in the obvious. It is tucked away in those things that we are the most accustomed to and take the most for granted. Holy tabernacles may be built in the mundane matters of everyday life.

The currents and the streams of God's Grace can cut their way mysteriously beneath the surface of our human experience.

CONCLUSION

As we serve to comfort the wounded, restore the weary, disarm the angry, and guide the confused, we can rest assured that deeds of love and mercy always have consequences. They may be too subtle for us to see or too hidden for us to appreciate fully. But they are there.

The big things one does in and through the church - the offices held, the hours of voluntary service given, the size of the financial pledge - are important, but not to the substitution for the small ministrations extended. It's the little things in daily living - the encouraging smile, the attentive ear, the time given to a child who needs to be heard, that show up on the bottom line of one's commitment to the Christ. As the Old Hymn puts it: "The cup of water given for thee still holds the freshness of thy grace..."

Closing prayer: Lord God, may the doors of our hearts be wide enough to welcome all who need human love and fellowship and Your divine care; but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and lack of love. Here may the temped find help, the sorrowing receive comfort, the careless be awakened to repentance, and the penitent be assured of your mercy; and here may all your children renew their strength and go on their way in hope and joy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

[1] Pagels (*Beyond Belief*, pp. 9-10).