

A CUP OF COLD WATER

Sometimes I think we make being a Christian too darned hard. Too darned complicated. Too darned sacrificial. This morning Jesus would like to clear up some of the misunderstandings we may have about being a follower of his and what his expectations are.

“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

Wait a minute, Jesus? That can't be right. Maybe I'm missing the fine print or something. Earlier in this very same chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus called his disciples to very large and demanding tasks: healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons. Persecution and suffering were to be accepted, if not welcomed.

And then there are those other well-known and challenging teachings of our Lord, such as: Taking up our cross. Turning the other cheek when someone strikes it. Forgiving our enemies. Loving Jesus more than family and friends and careers and those luxuries of life we desire because, after all, life is hard and we deserve to treat ourselves. Selling all we have and giving it to the poor, and following him.

And there are many other teachings of Jesus that are just as hard and challenging. Teachings that cause us to sigh loudly and shake our heads in discouragement and cause us to ask ourselves, “How can I possibly do that? I guess I'm doomed to be a failure as a Christian.”

But in this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel, as if to remind us that the Kingdom of God comes by grace alone and not by any good works we do (even if it was Jesus himself who told us to do those good works), our Lord gives us another teaching. A much simpler and way more reasonable teaching. Indeed, it almost sounds too simple and reasonable to our ears.

“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

A cup of cold water? That's it?

I can only imagine what Jesus' disciples must have thought when they heard Jesus say that. They had already given up their homes and job and families, gotten calloused hands doing the difficult work of healing and

exorcisms, and even risked their lives to take the gospel to the streets so others could hear it; and now here was Jesus saying that a cup of cold water given to a parched throat will do the trick just as well!

Now, for most of us run-of-the-mill Christians, those words of Jesus are very good news. We who are generally failures at casting out demons, who would rather stay in our pews than take the Gospel out into the streets, who cling to our jobs and salaries as if salvation comes in a monthly paycheck, and who find praise far more satisfying than persecution, even we can open the doors of the kingdom of Heaven through an act of hospitality as seemingly insignificant as giving a thirsty stranger a cup of cold water. That's right in our wheelhouse, to be sure. "Thanks be to God for that!" we say.

I once read a sermon on this morning's Gospel reading that started this way: "We in America love to have things big. We like big church buildings. We like to hear about churches growing at astonishing rates. It's not hard to like bigness in America, where the average entree at a restaurant these days could feed four people, and where the average car or truck can't fit into normal parking spaces anymore. Oftentimes, smaller churches are left feeling like failures unless they manage to change into a big church.

"Well, in today's gospel reading, Jesus says he prefers the small, trivial acts of faithfulness that don't get noticed by the world. For the church of Jesus Christ, smaller might even be better." To which we shout, if only in our hearts, "Amen!" and "Thank you Jesus!"

Okay, let's be honest here. As Americans we may like things big, but as Christians, we like our faithfulness small. The lower the expectations, the better. We'd just as soon leave it to someone more obedient and faithful than us to do the heavy lifting for Christ, the big and generous works of righteousness that demand significant sacrifice or might cause us criticism or ridicule. So, we'll just take Jesus at his word here in Matthew 10:42, thank you very much. Have a glass of water?

Even so, in the back of our minds, aren't we at least a little skeptical? Don't we wonder if Jesus is setting us up? Because we realize that we could all stand to be better Christians, right? We could all try a little harder, make a little more progress and grow in our faith. We all know a cross or two we could be bearing, or a person or three we could better welcome or support or accept or forgive. That being the case, can faithfulness to Christ really be as easy as giving someone a cup of cold water?

According to Jesus, "Yes, it can be. And here's why, in my humble opinion.

In a world as broken and fragmented as ours is, where the poor are often

demonized, millions of sick and vulnerable have no health insurance and are left to fend for themselves, and even simple courtesy, respect and civil discourse are all too rare, a hospitable act of compassion such as giving someone a cold cup of water just might make a world of difference to them.

Think about it. We hear all the time about people being attacked in their own homes, so something as obvious and easy as answering the doorbell and allowing a stranger to use your phone to call AAA is an act of faithfulness. Being approached by someone who says they're lost and asks us for directions gives us second thoughts and causes us to hesitate.

Holding the hand of someone we don't know as an expression of concern and compassion and involves bodily contact. What if they didn't wash their hands? Visiting the hospital or a nursing home means having to interact with the sick, the dying and the lonely, and we're not sure what to say or do in that situation.

In today's world—a world of fences and barriers, sorrow, loneliness, isolation, distrust, fear, anger and violence, even a simple act of Christian hospitality can be a risky, uncomfortable, and possibly even dangerous act. Even giving someone a cup of cold water could possibly cause us harm, if we happen to offer it to the wrong kind of person.

So what Jesus is calling us to do in this morning's Gospel reading might be more of a big deal than we first realized; giving someone a cup of cold water might push us outside our comfort zone and force us to overcome a certain level of fear and reluctance. Maybe showing kindness and compassion, especially to strangers, should come with a warning label, like everything else seems to have: Caution: Acts of charity can cause anxiety and stress.

Still, Jesus urges us, as his followers, to reach out to our brothers; to reach out to our sisters; to be genuinely concerned about them, and attend to their basic needs. Like water, and food, and shelter, and good health.

The world can be a frightening place. Our next door neighbors and the people we cross paths with every day can be kind of odd, or a little scary. But some of them are also hungry, sad, despairing, or grieving a terrible loss. And Jesus says to welcome such individuals. Bring them into our lives. Engage them in conversation and listen to their stories. Touch them if it's appropriate. Open our hearts and make ourselves vulnerable to another person in the name of Jesus.

When that person is thirsty, we're to give them a cup of cold water to slake their thirst. Doing that isn't as easy as it first seems, and it may not be a very comfortable thing for us to do, but that's discipleship, says Jesus.

That's what I want my followers to go out and do.

Methodist Bishop Ken Goodson shared a story about the time he went to dinner at the end of a church conference. Surrounded by friends and colleagues, Bishop Goodson welcomed the young woman who was serving his table, and as they held hands in a circle to say a prayer before the meal, he invited the waitress to join them.

He thanked God for the day and asked God to bless the food, to be with them in their time of fellowship and throughout the night. And then, with the worn out hand of the waitress cradled in his own, he prayed, "God, we thank you for our waitress this evening. We thank you for the way she has cared for us and served us so well. If there is anything hurting her, if there is any place in her life where she needs your healing, grant her your presence and your love in the same way she has been so gracious to us this evening. Amen."

Bishop Goodson looked up, and there were tears streaming down the young woman's face. With her hands still bound in the circle, she had no way to wipe them off. "Thank you," she said. "Today has been a terrible day. Nothing in my life is going right just now. How did you know?"

Bishop Goodson didn't know, of course. But then again, in a way, maybe he did know. Because don't all of us need our hand to be held? Need someone to share a meal with? Need someone to acknowledge our neediness and our pain? Need a brief prayer offered on our behalf to light up our darkness and break through our isolation?

Of course we do, all of us, because that's the human condition. And as the community of God and followers of Jesus Christ, we're called to offer a cup of cold water and pour healing grace on the fragmented lives of others. Which is all well and good, if only doing that wasn't so scary, so frightening, and so risky!

Extending the grace and love of God to another runs the risk of rejection, of being laughed at, of being criticized, of pain and tears. If we do it, he might not like us. She might refuse our kindness. Others we're trying to offer a cup of cold water to might insult us. Might throw the water in our face. Might persecute us. Who knows, they might even crucify us.

And yet, as Jesus welcomed others, and as Jesus has welcomed us, so we're to pass it forward and welcome others; if not for their sake then for our sake, because showing kindness and compassion to our neighbor might just be the answer to our own sadness, our own loneliness, our own isolation, and our own deepest yearnings for community and kinship with other human beings.

"And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

It sounds simple, doesn't it? But it might just be one of the most difficult things we're called to do as Jesus' followers. Because it's so easy to ignore that particular teaching of Jesus, to slough it off, to consider it too minor and unimportant to even bother with. But actually, it was the very heart and core of Jesus' ministry. And Jesus wants us to make it the very heart and core of our ministry, too.

And when we do reach out, open our hearts and make ourselves vulnerable by offering the grace of God through seemingly small and meager acts, then, God willing, it will result in genuinely encountering the recipient of our acts and finding fellowship with them in Christ; and we will truly be able to call them our sisters and our brothers and love them as Jesus commanded we do.

So, my friends, never discount the simple act of offering a cup of cold water to another who is thirsty. It may seem like a very trivial and minor thing to do, so why even bother to do it? But, to someone dying of thirst, the little cup of water we give them may just save their life.

And when we're thirsty, as we all will be at some point in our lives, I pray that the Lord will send someone to us with a cup of cold water, too: the water of kindness and compassion, of love and support and fellowship with another person that our parched souls yearn for. Amen.