

FILL MY CUP LORD
Psalm 13; Matthew 10:40-42

The passage from the Gospel according to Matthew is a continuation of the reading from last week. You may recall the disciples are about to go on a mission. They're going to share the gospel message by casting out unclean spirits and curing every disease and sickness. This is a tall order. They're going to need serious provisions for something like this. But Jesus has instructed them to go out with only the clothes on their back; that's it – no extra tunic, no money, no food. The only thing they have to rely on is the kindness of strangers. Hospitality is their only provision.

Behind Jesus' instructions to the disciples is a lesson for us all: hospitality is crucial to the advancement of forgiveness and healing, of justice and mercy, of righteousness and hope. No hospitality, no gospel message. Well, if hospitality is so important, how do we practice it? Apparently, according to Jesus' instructions, by offering a cup of cold water.

Really, Jesus? It's that simple? It's that small? You're talking about the advancement of a kingdom! If something that big relies on hospitality, how is a cup of cold water going to adequately express that? How is a miniscule act of kindness going to change anything? How is being nicer going to usher in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

A friend of mine returned from sabbatical leave a couple of years ago and shared stories of his time as he traveled with a group of students from the Center for Global Education. They traveled to an indigenous village in Mexico called Amatlán. A man came to speak to them about his experience with crossing the border and working in the United States. His wife sat next to him knitting something while he shared his story. The man, who looked to be in his early 30's, told them that when his wife became pregnant they had no money and no financial hope for starting their family. So they made the decision for him to go to the U.S. and find work.

He scraped by in Mexico, saving up the \$500 it takes to pay a coyote to illegally lead you across the border. He paid his money, and then he walked through the desert with a group of men under cover of darkness, unable to see if there was a snake or a scorpion in his path. He walked through the blaze of unforgiving daylight, wearing holes in his shoes and becoming exhausted from dehydration. One man in his 70s collapsed from the heat, so he carried him on his shoulders the rest of the way. When they crossed the border, they were immediately intercepted by the Border Patrol and taken back.

Penniless and humiliated, he started over. He earned that \$500, he took the horrendous journey again, and this time he made it into the United States where he found work. He worked ten-hour shifts with no breaks making less than minimum wage, never stopped even when he cut his hand open washing dishes; his boss wouldn't let him stop. And since he couldn't speak English, he couldn't express his needs, let alone defend himself under harsh treatment. After three years of saving up a little money under these conditions, he went back home, where he met his now three-year-old daughter for the first time.

At this point my friend looked over at his wife, still knitting; still looking down, as a tear rolled down her cheek, but she quickly wiped it away, as if it was an enemy to which she refused to succumb. A student in the group moved by the man's testimony, asked, "How can we help? What can we do to change this?" to which the man simply replied, "Just be nicer. Don't treat us like we're horrible. Be kind."

How is that cold cup of kindness any meaningful extension of hospitality? In spiritual terms, that small gesture takes seriously the instructions Jesus gives to the disciples: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." According to the Jewish law of Jesus' time, a person's emissary was synonymous with that very person. Like Paul says in Galatians, "You welcomed me as Christ Jesus." To welcome a disciple with even a cup of cold water is to receive Christ, and to receive Christ is to receive God.

Now, before we get hamstrung on who we're supposed to show kindness to, limiting "these little ones" to being only Christians, fast forward to Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel where Jesus talks about our requirement to help everyone. Jesus says that extending kindness to any human being, welcoming any member of what the poet Maya Angelou beautifully terms "the human family," especially those who are among our society's most vulnerable outcasts, is to welcome Jesus and thereby to welcome the Divine.

Yvette Flunder, the senior pastor of City of Refuge United Church of Christ in San Francisco, writes, "Oppressive theology, or a theology that welcomes those who fit a normative definition of the dominant culture while excluding those who do not, is a ball and chain on the heart of the body of Christ, and with it we keep each other in bondage."^[1] Now we start to see why hospitality is crucial to the gospel, why it's essential to the kingdom of God. See, when Jesus liberates us from having to distinguish between who is deserving in our judgment and who is not, the shackles of partiality are loosed so that we can freely offer more and more of those simple acts of kindness to all of God's little ones.

I heard a story once about a young parish priest visiting with an older priest. The young priest mentions the vagrants who come by his church seeking help. He says to his elder, "I know we're supposed to help the poor, but these people are asking for help with a bus ticket or a utility bill or gas money or food. Is that really their story? The last thing they're likely to spend that money on is the bus ticket or the utility bill or the gas tank or food. They'll probably spend it on something the Church doesn't support, something that I certainly don't support." Finally, the young priest says, "It gets exhausting justifying who I'm going to help and why." The older priest sits back and lets the young priest's words loom in the air like a confession waiting for assurance. Then the older priest says, "What business is it of yours determining who gets help and who doesn't? Why exhaust yourself with that burden? You are a follower of Jesus Christ. Your task, therefore, is simply to share out of the wealth of God's abundance. Your requirement is simply to love others as God loves you. Your job is simply to give."

Hospitality frees us to offer a cup of cold water to someone who might be in a situation completely foreign to our experience; someone in a world that is outside our limited understanding. And when we are brought into relationship with one another by the bond that hospitality creates, there is no more host and guest, no more insider and outsider; there is only a

space in which we listen to and learn from one another, value and honor one another until all the uneven ground on which we stand becomes level, and the rough places are made a plain.

When I served as Interim Pastor of Grace Moravian Church we took turns with other Moravian churches hosting the evening meal and overnight shelter at Sunnyside Ministries in Winston Salem. On one of our evenings I enjoyed dinner with a family of four: a single mom with two children and a teenager. The mom worked most evenings as a cab driver. We got to talking about our dream vacation, what it would be. She said, "I'd go to a beach somewhere; doesn't matter where. And, I'd want my babies right there with me."

I said, "That sounds great except for the part about having my kids there every waking moment." With my foot in my mouth, I proceeded to talk about a wedding I did in Georgia. The bride's parents had put me up in a motel room with a dear friend and her two children. I spent a lot of time in that room with two stir-crazy kids with way too much energy. I said, "The vacation was great, but it would've been better if I'd had an occasional timeout from the kids. I mean, they were right there with us in that room all the time."

The mom looked at me with raised eyebrows and said, "That's my reality every day. You need to change your perspective."

I believe hospitality is crucial to the gospel message because unless we change our perspectives, unless we change the state of our hearts and minds about the strangers that our society beats down into vulnerable exhaustion, unless we are able to see others not as other but as beloved, then we cannot be about the mission of sharing the good news of forgiveness and healing, of justice and mercy, of righteousness and hope.

Jesus speaks about how when we welcomed the least of these who are members of his family, we in fact welcomed him. And in the book *Making Room*, Pamela Buck and Christine Pohl write that "the most vulnerable strangers are those people who are disconnected from relationships with family, church, economy, and civic community."^[2] Well, if the least of these in God's family are cut off from worldly family, from church, from economy and from civic community, who in our society is Jesus telling us to welcome? Who is Jesus telling us to listen to and learn from so the gospel message would be advanced and God's kingdom would grow?

Perhaps we need to offer a cup of cold water to the soldier back home after six tours in Afghanistan, who now suffers from depression and Post Traumatic Stress disorder, and who hears daily people all around him becoming more and more convinced by the 24-hour news cycle that people with PTSD are threats to society.

Perhaps we need to extend kindness to the teenager whose parents kicked her out of the house when they discovered that she was gay because their church teaches them that homosexuality is a sin.

In the words of the man in Amatlán, perhaps we need to be nicer to the undocumented immigrants in our midst, the women and men living in the shadows of an infrastructure

maintained in no small part by their hands, who are too afraid to visit a hospital when they are injured or sick because they might be deported.

And perhaps by practicing hospitality, we would be ushered into a mutual space where all of us little ones realize that each of us is loved equally by God, and that each of us is crucial to God's kingdom of forgiveness and healing, justice and mercy, righteousness and hope on earth as it is in heaven.

Shall we pray? God of abundant hospitality, Jesus tells us that in Your house there are many mansions, a place for all of Your children. So may our lives become a spacious sanctuary where all who enter it would find peace, rest, and adventure, and be blessed of Your love for having been welcomed there. As we have been the recipients of Your living water in Christ Jesus to the point of our cup overflowing, move us from hostility to hospitality so we would have all we need to carry out Jesus' instructions of offering a cold cup of water to any of Your children. It's for the sake of the gospel message and Your kingdom of many blessings that we pray. Amen.