

"A Cup of Cold Water"

Matthew 10:40-42

26 June 2005

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⁴⁰"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever 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; ⁴²and 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.

About 800 years ago there lived outside the small Italian village of Gubbio (Gubbi-o) a wolf who was terrorizing and devouring the townspeople when ever one of them dared to leave the city gates. Commerce came to a standstill. Travel ceased to exist. Food and water became scarce. Terror could be seen in the eyes of each of the citizens. The elders of the village did not know what to do.

Word spread of the terrorizing wolf to all the surrounding villages and near by cities. A Roman Catholic priest, Father Francis, learned of the wolf and the terrified people of Gubbio, and decided to go and have a word with the wolf. Members of his parish warned him, "Do not go, Father Francis, for the wolf will eat you." "He will not eat me," the good padre proclaimed. "The wolf is my brother."

When the wolf saw Father Francis coming down the road, he charged him, baring his teeth and growling, crouching for the kill. The Father made the sign of the cross over the wolf and the wolf bowed at his feet. "Come with me, brother wolf," the parish priest invited. "Do not hurt anyone. Let us go and visit the people of Gubbio."

The crowd in the village square gave Father Francis and the wolf plenty of room to pass as they made their way to the platform. "Good people of Gubbio," Francis began, "before you is the wolf who has been terrorizing you. He is hungry, for his food in the wilderness has gone. If you feed him, you will have no reason to fear him, and he will be your friend." The wolf and the townspeople agreed, and Francis went on to preach a sermon on God's love and mercy, and the importance of practicing Christian hospitality, based on our Gospel lesson for

today.

For two years the wolf lived in peace with the people of Gubbio. They fed him food and water from their hands. When the wolf died, the people of Gubbio wept, for the wolf was a reminder to them of the holiness of Saint Francis of Assisi, and God's gentle presence with them. (with thanks to Craig T. Kocher, **Pulpit Resources**, June 26, 2005)

A little bit of kindness and hospitality goes a long way.

Here at the end of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, these final words of Jesus must have come as a welcome surprise to his disciples. In a continuation of the past two Sundays, Jesus was enlisting the help of his disciples into welcome relief for his exhausting ministry to the growing throngs of people: of preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and raising the dead.

If I had been one of his disciples and Jesus told me that I'd be doing these things, truth be told, I'd be scared to death. "Healing lepers? You've got to be kidding. I'm not touching that!" "Raising dead people? Thanks, but no thanks, I'm not in the Frankenstein business." Preaching and teaching? Couldn't we just hire someone to do it for us? Leaving home, family, business, and money behind - certain to face persecution? There must be a better way.

Truth be told, ministry is hard work. It's dirty work. And most of us would like an easier way out.

So when Jesus tells us this morning that a cup of cold water given to a parched throat will do the trick just as well – we rise up and say "Amen to that, brother!"

We live in a religious environment that celebrates bigness. Big, fast growing auditorium type churches are the envy of bishops, pastors and churches alike. Big screens with professionally done presentations, audio and video, more volume for the bands, more seating for the orchestra, higher ranks for larger choirs, atriums with welcoming kiosks, big parking lots filled with big fleets of buses to bring attenders in, big programs for kids and youth. It seems like the mantra is more, bigger, and better.

And today, Jesus lifts up the small and seemingly insignificant acts of faithfulness – welcoming a prophet or a righteous person, welcoming Jesus, or simply giving a cup of cold water to a little one – well, now, there you have it. Even I lend my voice to the voices of little, o' Zion, and enthusiastically join the chorus "preach

it, Jesus!"

Can faithfulness really be this easy? I mean what about "turn your other cheek," and "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" and "go the second mile" and "sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me?" What happened with them? How does a little act of hospitality and kindness compare?

Today, Jesus tells us that smallness matters. The details matter. Genuine hospitality and simple acts of kindness are just as important as the big issues of faithful discipleship. In an environment today of car-jackings, offering someone a ride can be just as significant an act of faithfulness as personally inviting a thousand people to worship. In an era of home invasions, answering the door with a smile and a kind "hello" becomes a vital act of faithfulness. In a hospital filled with antibiotic resistant diseases, the simple act of holding a hand becomes an act of radical discipleship. Going to visit an old visit might mean traveling on an airliner with an armed sky marshal on board prepared to stop a potential act of terrorism. That takes faith, my friends.

In today's world where the majority of the earth's population does not have clean, potable drinking water, accepting a cup of clean, cold drinking water becomes a true act of faith "and intestinal fortitude. In this kind of world, a world of walls and barriers, violence and intense loneliness, Christian hospitality become a prophetic act." (Craig T. Kocher, **Pulpit Resources**, June 26, 2005)

There are in the greater Rochester region two wonderful Roman Catholic religious orders for women, the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Mercy. I have been privileged to be associated and acquainted with many of the Sisters of Mercy, as has our Lay Leader, Sharon Boyd, over the past 7 months. I have come to appreciate and admire the sisters, for they practice gracious Christian hospitality, the giving of a cup of cold water to the thirsty, as a part of their core personality. It is who they are; it's a part of their identity – to anticipate the need, and to meet it – or exceed it, even before the individual is aware of the need. Their faith causes them to reach out in the name of Christ, practicing radical hospitality, to the poor, the uninsured, the homeless, and the aged. These women are true sisters of mercy; shining examples of our Gospel this morning brought to life, and lived as Christ would want us to live.

There are many things Zion isn't. We aren't large, and probably never will be. We don't have lots of money, but God has given us all that we need. We don't offer lots of program, but what we do offer attempts to match the talent with the mission.

As my fourth year as your pastor comes to an end, and as I begin my fifth, I've noticed a few things. There are many things that Zion is. We are a church with core values. We hold dear the fact that we reach out in missions. We are a praying church – and we believe in the power of God working through prayer. We are a worshiping church that loves to make music and sing, who finds strength in orthodoxy and tradition, who finds strength in God's word and sacraments.

And Zion is a church of gracious hospitality. It may be our most important character trait. It certainly reflects the deep seeded faith of our members and friends. If it wasn't for your gracious hospitality, I wouldn't be here this morning. Personally, it has breathed new life into my faith and ministry, and for that I am eternally grateful. It causes me to look ahead to the next four years with anticipation and joy.

Beloved Zion, practice the larger aspects of faithful living. But don't forget the smaller ones, too. Don't forget the value of feeding and befriending the wolf. Live up to the standard of gracious hospitality that has been practiced here in the past. In the name of Christ, offer to the thirsty a simple cup of cold water.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.