

“The Power of a Cup of Cold Water”

Date: June 28, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Hebrews 13:2; Matthew 10:40-42 Occasion: Pentecost 4, Year A

Themes: Compassion; hospitality; love

Jesus expects us to take care of each other. He said, “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciples, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” I would suggest that showing hospitality and demonstrating compassion are the first steps in Christian discipleship.

The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked *this* question – “What is the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture?” The person asking the question expected the answer to be a clay pot, or perhaps a fishing hook or a grinding stone. Her answer?

She replied “A healed femur.” The femur, of course is the leg bone above the knee. Mead went on to explain that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns, where survival of the fittest is the rule. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person’s hunting and gathering until the leg healed.

The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization. I would contend that it is also the first sign of the work of Christ in a Christian’s life. Jesus pointed out that even the smallest act of kindness will be rewarded.

Today’s gospel lesson is about hospitality and compassion. Let’s begin by dealing with the “cup of cold water.” Jesus taught his disciples, both then and today, that we are to be hospitable to strangers. In that far-off time, people practiced hospitality as a virtue. The stranger was like a brother or sister. The visitor had a place of honor.

Water was not easy to obtain. In rural areas there was no access to running water, especially *cold* running water. Women usually carried large jars on their heads to the well, twice a day – once early in the morning and then again in the evening – to get fresh water. There was no refrigeration, so cold water would not stay cold for very long.

To give a cup of cold water was a luxury. It would indicate a high level of Middle-Eastern hospitality. It was Jesus' expectation that his disciples would show this high level of care and concern for others, going above and beyond what the average person might do.

For several weeks, Mrs. Sherman's 1st grade class had waited for their field trip to the observatory. Notices had been sent home with instructions about the bus, lunch and times of departure and return. To the students, waiting for the field trip was like waiting for Christmas.

Finally, the day arrived. Everyone grabbed their lunches and lined up for the bus. In the back of the room, one boy began to cry because he had forgotten to bring a lunch, and he would have to stay behind with another teacher. In a few minutes, however, the other children had contributed extra sandwiches, fruit, desserts and drinks, until the boy had a feast for lunch. He would be allowed to go on the trip with his classmates.

With new tears, this time tears of gratitude, he grabbed his coat, lined up with the other children and got on the bus. You see, his class-mates had given him a cup of cold water. Acts of service are not always dramatic or earth shattering. Simple caring is all that is needed. Discipleship means looking for opportunities to care and to demonstrate God's love to others.

A picture on Facebook has been making the rounds of a little boy who stopped to say a prayer for police officers in the lobby of this building. He knew they were under a lot of pressure lately, and he wanted to show

them that he cared about them. That picture has touched a lot of hearts, because it shows that little boy could empathize with what another person might be going through.

Equally powerful was the scene of other Nascar racers who walked behind and alongside of Bubba Wallace, the only black racing car driver on the circuit, showing their solidarity, love and concern after a noose was found in his garage stall, fearing that it was a form of racial intimidation. Rather than question him or his motives, they stood and walked to show their love and support. He was moved to tears with gratitude.

Compassion is the ability to see and to recognize and to stand with another person in their time of need. A cup of cold water demonstrates you recognize a person's thirst and you want to provide them with relief. Compassion is when we put our love into action, getting away from mere words and demonstrating what we say we believe.

Jesus taught us to be hospitable to strangers. He taught us that we are here to serve and not to be served. The author of Hebrews tells us that when we show compassion and hospitality we might very well be serving an angel. Jesus said when we do it to the least of these it's like doing it for him.

So, never under-estimate the power of a cup of cold water. You don't have to give long sermons to convince people of God's love. We love people with kindness, understanding and compassion. And then, if we get the opportunity, we tell them about the love of God and Jesus. Our loving actions open the door to being able to witness to the love of Jesus Christ and what he did on the cross.

There are people out there in this world who are dying of thirst, waiting for someone to offer them a cup of cold water. Perhaps literally,

perhaps figuratively, but people are dying of thirst. With the love of Jesus we can meet both their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. But it begins with compassion, the consideration of the other person.

I like the legend of the famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. Its many buildings were once filled with young monks, and the chapel resounded with the singing of the choir. But now it was almost deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. Only a handful of monks remained.

On the edge of the monastery, an old rabbi had built a tiny hut. He came there from time to time to pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk, "The rabbi walks in the woods."

One day, the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and bear his heart to him. As he approached the small hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting for him for some time. The two embraced.

The abbot entered the hut with the rabbi and inside he saw in the middle of the room a wooden table with the Scriptures open. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and he too broke down and cried.

After the tears and all was quiet, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it out loud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, “The Messiah is among you.” The abbot stood in stunned silence. Then the rabbi said, “Now, you must go.” The abbot left without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapel. He told them that he had received a teaching from the rabbi who walks in the woods, and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, “The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah.”

The monks were startled and thought to themselves, “What could it mean? Is Brother John the Messiah? No, he’s too old and crotchety. Is it Brother Thomas? No, he’s too stubborn and set in his ways. Am I the Messiah? What could this possibly mean?” They were deeply puzzled by the rabbi’s teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, though, something began to happen at the monastery. The monks began to treat one another with a reverence. They were gentle with one another. They lived with one another as brothers once again. Visitors found themselves deeply moved by the genuine caring and sharing that went on among them. Before long, people were again coming from great distances to be nourished by the prayer life of these monks. And young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

Isn’t that lovely? Jesus said, “He who receives you receives me.” We practice hospitality and compassion because in one another we see the face of Christ. It is the first step in Christian discipleship. Never underestimate the power of a cup of cold water. Hospitality and compassion are the signs that Christ is welcome. And where Christ is welcome, all things are possible. Amen. And amen.