“***A Cup of Water***” by S. Finlan, for The First Church, June 28, 2020

**Matt 10:40–42**

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.”

The emphasis here is on fairness and kindness, especially toward believers. Even someone who gives a cup of water to one of his little disciples, will not lose his or her reward, he says. If you’ve ever been very needy, possibly far from home, and someone did an act of kindness for you, I’m sure you remember it.

Hospitality was even more important in the ancient world than it is in ours. People often had to travel long distances, and it was customary to be kind to pilgrims and travelers. We see it in a number of biblical stories, and we see it in other cultures, too.

Acts of goodness really matter. As James wrote, “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). The good deed of giving water really matters. One good act creates many unseen ripples, and those can create more ripples.

But what about the need to accept Jesus as one’s personal Savior? Well, think for a minute about the one who offered a cup of water not losing their reward. Won’t that kind person get an opportunity to learn about Jesus? If they are already inclined toward kindness, they will learn who the real source of kindness is.

They, like all of us, will need to grow in the school of love and kindness. We *all* needinstruction and guidance, and those always take time. The person offering water will learn more about God; they will, in fact, learn that it was God who motivated them to *do* that action. I’d say we should really accept the teaching in James that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17 NIV). *Every* good thing comes from God. So that person’s act of kindness was also God-given. It stands to reason that *that* person will get to hear more about where their good motives come from. At some point in their studies they will learn that Jesus is the supreme instructor. When they recognize this, then I think they will accept Jesus as their personal Savior.

It is in the afterlife that many people will really turn to God. That is certainly the implication of the verse in 1 Peter, where it says Jesus “preached to the spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19 RSV). You only preach to someone who is capable of hearing and benefitting, don’t you? And these spirits were those who were dead since the time of Noah, the text says (3:20). Clearly, Jesus is preaching in an effort to *reach* and *affect* them spiritually. The kindness of Jesus is evident here.

The kindness of God is also affirmed in the OT. As the Psalmist says, “your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens” (Ps 89:2). The perfect embodiment of that goodness is found in the life of the Incarnate Son, “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). As Paul writes, “The glory of God” shines “in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). One way that Jesus shows his goodness and glory is in generously throwing a wide net around those to be saved. He was always open and inviting to all kinds of people, as long as they had the “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6). I think he extends this invitation even in the afterlife. In Luke, Jesus says God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. . . Your Father is merciful” (6:35–36). That doesn’t mean that everybody will respond to that mercy, but *some* will. Some didn’t get a full opportunity down here. Some were too wrapped up in survival needs. Some died young.

This raises, for me, the question of mercy.

There is an epitaph on a tombstone in England that says “John Newton, clerk [pastor], once an infidel & Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.” <https://www.family-times.net/-illustration/Mercy/>. This is the man who wrote “Amazing Grace.”

There’s another mercy story that concerns Calvin Coolidge, who awoke one morning in his hotel room to find a burglar going through his pockets. He asked the burglar not to take his watch chain because it contained a charm that he wanted to keep. Coolidge engaged the thief in conversation and discovered he was a college student who had no money to pay his hotel bill or buy a ticket back to campus. Coolidge counted $32 out of his wallet, called it a loan, and persuaded the dazed young man to give it back later! He advised the young man to leave the way he had come so as to avoid the Secret Service! And the loan was, indeed, paid back later” (same website). Would not God be at least as merciful as Calvin Coolidge?

The Wisdom of Solomon says, about God, “Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance you govern us . . . You have taught your people that the righteous must be kind” (Wis 2:18–19). *Why* must the righteous be kind? Isn’t it because *God* is kind? Kindness is a Godly quality. God judges with mildness and governs with great forbearance. All we students in the school of love and kindness will get to experience the joy of the Father’s love, and will have an opportunity to reflect God’s great gifts of mercy and kindness to others.

Of course, we have to recognize that we need God. We have to be spiritually serious. We have to be honest enough to ask God for guidance and help, and then we will get it. Ask and you will receive (John 16:24).

Someone who asked and who received was the Roman centurion named Cornelius, who went to the Jewish synagogue and listened to sermons. One day while he was at home praying, he was visited by an angel who told him to send some men to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter (Acts 10:4–6). He did this, and Peter, recovering from an intense vision that *he* had just seen, came to visit. Because of his vision, Peter was able to say “in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:35). Peter began preaching, and the gift of the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his people, surprising Peter and the other Jewish Christians (10:44–45). Peter baptized them (10:48). This is how the prayer of Cornelius was answered.

Thanks be to God! The psalmist said, “I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me” (Ps 13:6). Out of the abundance of goodness that God has shown to us, we can let some goodness spill out in our treatment of others. Out of the abundance of mercy we have received, we can extend an inviting mercy to others. It sounds obvious, when we say it.

As we go forth, let us seek guidance from God as we steadfastly seek to become ever more loving, like our Father in heaven.