

Matthew 10:40-42
4th Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2020
St. John's Lutheran Church, Stamford, CT

“A Cup of Cold Water”

The holy gospel according to Matthew. Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus said to the Twelve: 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 gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Dear hearers of God’s Word, grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said, “. . . whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones . . .” A cup of cold water.

- When I was in high school, much of my summer was spent stacking hay bales. Some years, I handled 20,000 bales of hay within a three-month period. The work was hot, dusty, dirty, and sweaty – often in the full glare of the sun; sometimes in the mow of a barn where the air was stifling, and the light was dim.

The best part of the day was when Mom came to the field midafternoon. She had a pan of cake with chocolate frosting, and coolers of cold water. To eat the cake to refuel bodies working hard and to rehydrate with fresh, cold water was renewing and energy-giving.

- We had an artesian well on our farm. I was in early grade school when the well was drilled, and I recall the hammering sound of the machine that pounded inch by inch into the earth. At 205 feet, an underground aquifer was tapped. An artesian well means that there is a natural underground pressure such that the water flows without having to be pumped. The overflow pressure was so great it could not be stopped or capped, and the overflow has run at 70 gallons a minute for the last 55 years. The aquifer from which the water rises is filled with sweet, cold, pure water.

On the side of the small structure built over the well and the overflow was a tin dipper hanging from a nail. When working around the shop or corrals, it was a welcome break to grab the dipper and take a big swig of the cold water. In fact, when neighboring farmers drove into the barnyard to visit with Dad, they often stopped at the well first because everyone knew about the dipper and the gift of cold water.

- When I was a bishop in Wisconsin, I occasionally traveled to Malawi, Africa to visit Lutherans in that country because we had a companion relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi. Malawi is one of the poorer countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and life for many is hard. Obtaining accessible, clean water is a problem for many villages. It is not unusual for the women to walk up to seven miles each way – every day! – to carry water from a stream or

spring. This fact resulted in numerous mission projects of drilling wells in villages because it improved the health of the entire community – cool, clear, accessible water was life!

You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? You know what it is like when you are thirsty and the way a refreshing, cold cup of water can quench the most parched throat and dry mouth.

A cold cup of water is the image Jesus uses when he speaks of hospitality, of holy welcoming, of caring for those who are “little ones,” – those who have a thirst, a need that a disciple of Christ can meet; “little ones” – especially those who are vulnerable.

I am encouraged by and proud of those churches who have found themselves located in the heart of the Black Lives Matter protests. If your congregation found itself surrounded by protesters and law enforcement what would you do? Well, you’d do what the church always does – provide relief and support especially for those who are vulnerable. And so, volunteers gave out sandwiches, sanctuaries became spaces of refuge to get out of the sun, a few became medic centers, others handed out facemasks, and nearly all provided water bottles to protestors and police alike. Church buildings became food distribution and meal centers, and volunteers worked to clean up and repair damage caused by looters. Through it all, servants of Jesus provided “cold cups of water,” living out the symbolism of which Jesus speaks.¹

A cup of cold water . . . water is life and cold water brings relief. This is imagery that Jesus knows will connect with all who hear his words. And we know that the image of a cup of cold water extends far beyond literal H₂O.

When someone lonely receives a card in the mail or a phone call or a surprise visit, the thirst of loneliness is quenched by someone’s presence.

When a child is hurting inside, looking for affirmation and acceptance, to know that they are someone of worth, and an adult teacher or coach or parent says, “Nicely done” or “I’m proud of you,” a cup of cold water has been given from which the child drinks deeply.

When the new person stands awkwardly off to the side with a cup of coffee, not knowing the customs of the group, feeling out of place and regretting staying after the meeting, and another walks up to them and says, “Hi, my name is Natalie. I’d like to welcome you and introduce you to a few others here.” And a cup of cold water just got extended to a person who is no longer a stranger.

A cup of cold water. Some call this “practical Christianity,” the posture of all who follow Jesus, an approach to others that is always about quenching the thirst of another.

There is an old and wonderful story about a Sunday morning in a London church.²

¹ “Amid Protests, South Mpls. Churches Provide Masks, Water.” *CBS Minnesota*. May 28, 2020 <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2020/05/28/amid-protests-south-mpls-churches-provide-food-water/>

² Clippesby Church and Countryside. June 2020. <http://www.clippesbychurchandcountryside.co.uk/a-cup-of-cold-water/4593936301>

The worship was well underway when a young man walked into the sanctuary. He had long hair, torn jeans, and bare feet. The priest was about to start the sermon but waited while the young man looked for a seat in the crowded church, since all eyes were upon the young man and no one heard the introduction to the sermon anyway. But there was no place for the man to sit – the church was full.

So, the young man walked to the front and sat on the chancel steps near the pulpit. The atmosphere in the church became electric as the frowns and murmurs of disapproval rippled through the congregation. “What does he think he’s doing?” “Isn’t somebody going to do something?”

It was then that an old man slowly stood up from his seat in a pew. He was in his eighties, wore a tailored suit, and walked slowly with his cane tapping on the slate floor with each step. As the old man moved forward, some thought with relief, “Finally, someone is going to take care of this.”

The old man shuffled to the chancel steps, dropped his cane, and very slowly lowered himself to the floor beside the young man so that the visitor wasn’t alone.

When the priest pulled himself together to speak, he said, “You probably will not remember anything of my sermon this morning, but you will never forget what you have just witnessed.”

A cup of cold water. It comes in many forms and ways and expressions. It is hospitality, welcoming, care . . . all of it reflecting the grace of God that we know in Jesus.

One more thing to note in our gospel text. Jesus speaks of “reward.” A quick look might lead to a misreading of who it is that is rewarded. It’s not the one who welcomes who receives a reward, or the one who gives a cup of water who is rewarded. This has nothing to do with being rewarded for speaking graciously or doing a good deed.

It is the recipient of kindness who receives a reward.

It is the one who drinks from the cup of cold water who experiences a reward.

And what is that reward?

It is the reward of knowing God’s grace through us.

It is the refreshment of Jesus extended through you and me.

It is being ushered into the hospitality of God because we have offered a cold cup of water.

You see, as much as this text is about us extending a cup of cold water wherever and whenever we find those who are thirsty in need, the words of Jesus are really about the action of God that happens through us. It is God who is glorified, and it is the “little ones,” the vulnerable, who are rewarded.

You see, giving a cup of cold water has to do with the lifelong posture of welcoming, of being that person in the name of Jesus to quench with cool water whatever need of thirst is pressing upon another.

This is discipleship.

This is faithfulness.

This is living in a way that reflects the One who is the spring of Living Water,
the one who quenches every thirst of humankind.

May God bless those who are the recipients of this kingdom work of giving a cup of cold water.

Amen.

Pastor Duane Pederson