

Today's second reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 10 verses 40-42. Listen for God's word to you this day:

Jesus speaking to his disciples says:

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and 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."

This is the word of God, for the people of God...thanks be to God.

This section of Matthew comes at the end of the Mission Discourse, where Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples to go out into the world, this section is often overshadowed by what we call the great commission in chapter 28 and in part that may be because Jesus spends a lot of time in this chapter talking about the hardships the disciples will face as they share about God's kingdom. He goes to great length to tell them what their lives will look like as they share about Jesus' ministry and give witness to God's work in the world through him.

This foreshadowing of their mission in Matthew's account will invite persecution that includes being handed over to authorities and being flogged, Jesus describes them as sheep going into the midst of wolves, their time will bring fear, but Jesus challenges them to not fear those who can bring harm to the body but instead the one who can destroy the soul. He tells them he is coming to bring a sword, to divide families against

one another in order that all may believe Jesus' teaching. He is giving them a rather frightful outlook on what is to come, the beginning of a revolution, a new way of understanding our relationship with God and one another, that will inevitably lead to discomfort in ones body and in relationship to others.

This rather grim portrayal of what they should expect for their lives as Jesus' disciples goes on for 39 verses and then we get to our pericope for today, verses 40-42, Jesus, continuing to teach the disciples about their journeys, seems to shift his focus a little to give instruction to those who will receive the disciples, these straggly, itinerant missionaries, moving from town to town, sharing about the life of Jesus. He is telling the disciples that those who receive them, welcome them as representatives of Jesus and will themselves be rewarded.

It would have been understood in the time of Jesus, that you represent the people and places from which you come, if you arrive in town people want to know who you belong to, who sent you, and why you're there and it is by those things that you would be welcomed or told to leave. It meant something to say you were a follower of someone, or from a particular area. We know this to be true as we have understood the way people are marginalized in scripture based on any number of factors, and we know this to be true today, in towns like Weatherford where some of the first questions often asked when meeting someone include where are you from and who are your people. It's one of the fastest and easiest ways we have as humans to size someone up, to assess whether or not they should be welcomed.

Being welcomed then in the days of the disciples, and being welcomed now, is often an act of trust. It is trusting that good will come from the relationship, it is trusting

that at least one of you has something to offer to the other. And beyond trust I think it is an act of hope. It is an act of trust showing the hope we place in God's promise that we are connected beyond anything that divides us. That we are all God's children and that we believe there is more to that than it just being a saying. But, welcome is hard, because it makes us vulnerable. It opens us up to the possibility of pain. Yet, there is some nagging feeling that we get that can lead us right into being welcomed or welcoming others, to trusting in that hope, even when there's a risk. I would surmise from my experience that nagging feeling is often the Spirit of God, leading us right into relationships we may not otherwise have, offering us the chance to know God and Jesus through the eyes of someone else.

Whether it has been on the rooftop in a Palestinian refugee camp, a single family compound in Ghana, in houses that had dirt floor made up of only one sleeping room and one kitchen room in Guatemala, in the greenhouse of a family on Jeju Island, South Korea, into Emergency Room bays, and labor & delivery floors, in the living room of a US military family in San Antonio, Texas, into the lives of hundreds of people in the therapy room, in the rooms of our Grace First Members living at Martin Crest and Brookdale, and into many of your homes. The first act of welcome is always trust.

Trust in the hope of God's promise that we are connected beyond anything that divides us including nationality, understanding of the world, age, gender, racial designation, socio-economic status or any number of other labels that could divide us. While those things influenced our time together they were never more influential or centered than what brought us together, being children of God, loved immensely by a

Creator who longs for its people to worship and glorify God's name and love one another.

In our minds, from where we sit, we often times identify ourselves as the disciples in this story, which makes sense because we are the ones who have now been sent out to share the good news of Jesus, right? This approach, centering ourselves and people we know, or people we identify as like us as the disciples we are quick to say the disciples are people we would have welcomed into our homes, into our lives and our families, but Jesus does not describe them as powerful, authoritative people who would seem to garner respect on first impression. They didn't come from places with high reputations or people whose names we would have necessarily known.

Instead, he identifies them as "little ones". The people going out to spread the news about Jesus were not the type of people we may open our front doors to now and immediately invite in, although I'm not sure anyone does that for any person anymore. But, I'm not even sure they were the types of people who we would have gone to the town square to see speak. Dr. Eugene Eung-Chun Park says, Understanding Jesus' naming of his disciples as the little ones in need of a cold water "should rather lead to a recognition that members of early Christian communities in general were indeed 'little ones' and that wherever they came from, the disciples of Jesus were encouraged to identify themselves with the littles ones in the world, who are also called to serve other such littles ones in the world."¹

¹ Park, Eugene Eung-Chun, Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, page 193

We know cognitively that the disciples were itinerant preachers, moving around from town to town, and Jesus outlined for them in the previous section of Chapter 10 all the trials they would face in their work, but when we think of this in terms of today, who might be the disciples to us?

As Lance Pape asks, “Is it possible to imagine the homeless or the chronically hungry as bearers of the Christian message who are in desperate need of our hospitality? Our immediate reaction is to insist on a clear distinction between those we understand as the objects of our charity and those who have something to share for the sake of our faith. How can someone be a missionary when they are not sponsored for such purposes by an institution? How can they be vulnerable traveling preachers when they almost certainly do not understand themselves in this way?”

Pape’s approach gives us the opportunity to shift where we locate ourselves in the story, moving from disciple to host.

He goes on to say, “in the role of host we find ourselves strengthened in our own faith by these “little ones” who carry no money in their belt (10:9), no health insurance card in their purse. They cast themselves upon us in trust, and so create a cherished opportunity for the settled church to offer a simple cup of water to its Christ (8:20; 10:40-42, 25:40).”²

When we take ourselves out of the center of the narrative, as the disciples, and place in the center instead those in our society who would be described as little ones, or marginalized, or less valuable the meaning of our actions change. When we take

² Pape, Lance. Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, page 191.

ourselves out of the center as the disciples, and instead center ourselves as the hosts the story opens up new opportunities for us. We trust that God wants us to be welcomed, do we trust that God wants us to welcome others? Will we be the place the little ones find welcome? Will we open the door in trust of the hope we have that God's promises are true, that there is more that binds us than divides us?

This doesn't necessarily mean literal walk through the door welcome, it could mean opening ourselves to new ways of viewing others, learning about the experience of others so that we are able to have a welcoming spirit toward those we have not previously welcomed, or consciously stopping harmful ways of thinking about the little ones, the disciples, Christ in our midst.

The good news we receive today, is that in receiving and welcoming others we are rewarded, and that reward is not in material blessings, that is never promised, or in good health, that is never promised, the reward is in God's promise of relationship that binds us together as children of God. We receive through the disciples among us, through the little ones we welcome, the embodiment of Christ. We are rewarded with Christ among us. And all we have to do is welcome Christ in. How will you welcome Christ this week?