

A CUP OF COLD WATER
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
July 2, 2017

Matthew 10:40-42

It's good to be with you this morning, although it feels a bit odd to be standing here rather than sitting out there. Bill and I have appreciated this church since Than and Mary Anne moved to Shepherdstown some nine years ago. Over those years we have been here for Hazel's baptism, Randy's challenging sermons, and music – so much wonderful music. Most of all, we have experienced first-hand the warm welcome that this congregation extends to all people, and the strength of this community of faith. And so on June 11 we joined with Hazel and this church family in singing, "Don't worry 'bout a thing, cause every little thing's gonna be all right."

A couple months ago, Randy and I were talking about my preaching at this service, and he gave me a word of advice: *Never talk about your kids from the pulpit*, he warned. Now I agree with Randy on almost everything, but on this one point I have to disagree. Perhaps you will indulge me in a story about my son. Because I have always suspected that it was his influence that led me into the ministry as a second career pastor. I pretty much had to become a preacher, because I had already raised a "PK" – a preacher's kid – with all that suggests. You know the stereotype – the child who challenges authority, breaks the rules, poses the questions that no one else dares to ask. That was – that IS – Than Hitt – the teenager who set off firecrackers in the park and then ran from the police; the kid who rode a friend's motorcycle through the neighborhood, without a license, and thus earned his first (but not last) traffic citation. Rule breaking, authority challenging, questioning: those very traits that don't serve adolescents especially well have turned out to be life skills that serve science and the public interest quite nicely!

The gospel lesson for today has the potential to do the same thing – to challenge authority, break the rules, and pose the question that no one dares to ask. So listen to today's lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew – Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sent them out to serve the hungry, the sick, the outcasts of their day:

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me... 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

That's our text today, and on the surface it doesn't seem to be a particularly counter-cultural message, does it? We are quite familiar – even comfortable – with the idea of hospitality. Welcoming others, sharing a cup of cold water with those who thirst, literally and figuratively – that's pretty basic church stuff these days, especially in a congregation such as this, and it was even more basic in Jesus' day. The people of God have always known the importance of hospitality. The earliest stories of the Jewish people are stories of refugees, dependent on others: Abraham and Sarah, who left their home and became sojourners in a foreign land; Israelites who struggled as slaves in Egypt and later as exiles in Babylon. The story of the Jewish people is the story of God's chosen refugees. They knew the importance of hospitality. They suffered when

hospitality was not extended to them, and so they understood that they were to offer hospitality to the refugees in their midst.

Jesus knew and embraced these stories from his Jewish tradition, and so he sent his disciples out to serve those in need, emphasizing that even the smallest kindness, like giving a cup of cold water to one who thirsts, matters. It's a simple act, but a profound one, because it brings us face to face with those who are thirsty – up close and personal, one on one, equal in our need for the water that sustains life. There is no substitute for such an act of kindness, because it is the essence of love: Love as relationship, love as connection, love as community that embraces all people – not just the comfortable and well-situated, but also those on the margins – the poor, the outcast, the unlovely and unloved – all those who thirst.

When we give a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, we not only give life to them but to ourselves, as well. The Holy One in us touches the Holy One in them, and we both are changed: we both have our eyes opened. So, when we hear a voice at 3 am calling out for a cup of water, we learn something about ourselves as parents. When we reach out to a stranger who is thirsty or hungry or homeless, we learn something about ourselves as neighbor. Getting up close and personal with others helps us, in words of the Buddhist tradition, “see rightly”. It helps us see the invisible threads that bind all humankind – the thirsts we share; the injustices we abhor; the hopes we harbor; the dreams we dream.

When we are in relationship with those who struggle, we can see beyond our own relatively comfortable lives to the bigger picture of those who lack the basic necessities of life, and we are moved to take action on a larger scale. We find ourselves involved in political action to help bring about a world where all have access to clean water – to food – to health care – to education – to human rights and human dignity. Engagement in social justice is a hallmark of the Presbyterian tradition and of this congregation, where as a community and as individuals, you touch lives through direct action and political engagement. The personal and the political – both are essential.

The challenge, though, is that political action so often and so easily becomes divorced from people in need. We need look no further than the US congress as it tries to legislate behind closed doors – as senators and representatives avoid town halls, refusing to meet with people who are thirsty for justice, for health care, for jobs, for hope. One of the hallmarks of our current administration is its absence of concern for the needs of the “little ones” among us. Clean water? No. Clean air? No. Climate protection? No. Health care for all? No. Racial justice? No. Reproductive rights? No. LGBT equality? No. A living wage? No. Equal pay? No. The list seems never to end.

It's easy to criticize those who live in the ivory towers of power, especially the current administration, but they have fallen into a trap that lies in wait for any of us. Political action – on the left as well as the right – has a certain allure. It is visible, it earns us praise, it has the potential to make a BIG difference, and we long to see big changes in our world. The problems confronting our nation and world are huge, as is the work required to combat those problems.

And so we get busy. We teach. We organize. We argue. We protest. We fight. And if we're not careful, we wear ourselves out until we are too exhausted to respond when we hear that little voice in the night, calling for a cup of cold water.

Today's lesson reminds us that living authentically in the way and in the spirit of Jesus is first a matter of small, simple, even invisible acts of love. It may not be the modern American way, but it is our way. In our families – sometimes the hardest place to show consistent kindness; in our neighborhoods; in our workplaces; in our social networks; one on one encounters open our eyes and our hearts to others, grounding us in compassion.

Reaching out with a cup of cold water, up close, personal, one-on-one with those who thirst, may not get us the praise and accolades our egos desire. The culture in which we live may not pay much attention to what we are doing, at first, but the people whose lives we touch will. And in time, as we reach out to those who are thirsty – as our vision is changed – as we see the world rightly – as we work side by side with those who have received that cup of cold water, equal partners in the challenging work of our time, change will come.

And in all we do, we need to remember that we are called to be faithful, not just successful. We live in a culture dominated by the standard of success. Now, there is no problem with wanting to be successful in our efforts to make this world a better place. We all want our work to count. But that is not our only standard. The great task of love requires a different standard – a counter-cultural, even revolutionary standard – the standard of faithfulness: faithfulness to the needs of others, especially those who struggle for the essentials of life; faithfulness to the skills and abilities with which we each are blessed; faithfulness to the experiences that have shaped us; faithfulness to the people we encounter in the place where life has brought us; faithfulness to our commitment to love.

A cup of cold water – it's not a bad place to start.

Amen.