

Proper 8A, 2017 Sermon

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus said, "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 in the name of 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."

In ancient Jewish culture, business, legal, or social transactions were sometimes mediated through a person called a *saliah*, which we might roughly translate as “representative” or “ambassador”. A ruler or businessman gave the *saliah* temporary authority to be his stand-in, his proxy, with full power to sign treaties or negotiate business transactions on behalf of the person who sent him.

If the King of Israel sent his *saliah* to sign a treaty with a foreign king, for instance, that *saliah* was to be accorded all the respect due the King of Israel himself. If the *saliah* were insulted, it was the same as if the King had been insulted. The ancient Jewish Mishnah states: “The one sent by a man is as the man himself”. (K.H. Rengstorf, *TDNT* 1:414-20)

Now, as closely identified as the King and his *saliah* are, the identification of Jesus with his heavenly Father is even greater. For while the king’s *saliah* is given the temporary authority to act in the King’s name, as his stand-in, *Jesus* says, “I and the Father are **one**” (John 10:30); and again, “I am **in** the Father and the Father is **in** me.” (John 14:10) There is a mutual indwelling of Jesus in his Father and his Father in him; **and**, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ lives in *you* and *me*, also. *That* is why Jesus can say in our Gospel, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me...”

“Christ lives in me,” St. Paul wrote to the Galatians (Gal. 2:20), and he lives in you and me, also.

This puts a different perspective on our understanding of *ministry*. Friday night at our “Get to Know You” dinner, I distributed to some of our newer folk a booklet describing most of the ministries that are done in and through Christ Church. We often talk about the ministries **we** do and the ministries **we** are *called* to do; and that is fine, to talk that way. But in talking about “our” ministries, we must never forget that it is not *you and I alone* who actually **do** the ministries *ourselves*; rather, as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God works in us all in everything we do.” (1 Corinthians 12:6b, ICB)

Christ, who lives *in* us, **works** *in* us and *with* us to accomplish God’s purposes. If we have put aside our ego-selves and are open and vulnerable to the Spirit of God working in and through us, then *every* act we do, however small, is of God. “Not

all of us can do great things,” Mother Teresa reportedly said. “But we **can** do small things with great love.” This is what Jesus is saying in our Gospel today when he says, “If you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.” (NLT)

“We often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or entailing great feats,” writes David Lose, “and sometimes that is exactly what discipleship comes to. But at other times, Jesus seems to say, it’s nothing more than giving a cup of cold water to one in need. Or offering a hug to someone who is grieving. Or a listening ear to someone in need of a friend. Or offering a ride to someone without a car. Or volunteering at [Laundry Love]. Or making a donation to [El Hogar, or putting a can of food in our Little Free Pantry].

“Discipleship doesn’t have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but nurture the relationships that are most important to us, so also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures – except that, according to Jesus, there **is** no small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.

“You probably know as well as I do Loren Eiseley’s story of ‘the star thrower’... [A man is walking along a beach covered with thousands of starfish, and he keeps bending] down and tossing starfish after starfish back into the sea. When asked why, he replies that if they don’t get back in the water soon, they’ll dry out and die. Looking at the beach strewn with thousands of starfish, his [questioner] responds that he can’t possibly hope to make any difference. To which he says... ‘To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world.’

“Exactly. Because Jesus has promised to come in time to redeem all in love... and wipe the tears from every eye, we can in the meantime devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large, not trying to save the world -- *Jesus* has promised to do **that!** -- but simply trying to care for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed. And so even a cup of cold water can make a huge and unexpected difference to those to whom we give it and, according to Jesus, such acts have eternal and cosmic consequences.

“[So many of you, I know, ...are already doing this... You] are already, that is, in countless and myriad ways making this world God loves so much a little better, a little more trustworthy, a little more joyful through [your] gestures of love, mercy, and compassion. There is no small gesture... and through [your] cups of cold water, hugs, helping hands, and listening ears [you] are caring for the world God loves so much.” (www.workingpreacher.org)

In the end, it is not the magnitude or visibility of the ministry you perform that matters, but the *spirit* in which you perform that ministry. Giving a million dollars to a charity in order that you might get your picture in the paper or score political points is not, in the eyes of Jesus, as praiseworthy as giving a cup of cold

water in the spirit of Christ, in the spirit of love and compassion for the person you are giving it to (who is also, after all, Christ in disguise).

But you all **know** that! I look out at all your faces and I know I'm only aware of just a *few* of the ways so many of you minister cups of water, hugs, helping hands and listening ears, the Holy Spirit pouring the love of Christ through you in the process; and I am filled with awe and gratitude. For what David Lose says is true: “[E]ach and every act of mercy rings through the eons and across the universe imbued with Christ’s love for the world, a love we can share anytime and anywhere with gestures that may seem small in the eyes of the world but loom large in the life of those who witness them.” (*ibid.*)

The ancient Jewish *saliah* was authorized to act temporarily in the King’s name, to be the vicarious presence of the King. With us disciples of Christ, though, it is different. When Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me” it is not because we are Jesus’ *saliah*. Christ lives *in* us, works *with* us and *through* us. There is nothing vicarious about it. We *participate* in Christ’s work of healing the world, cooperate *with* him; we don’t do it *for* him, like we were some pinch hitter coming into the game in his place.

“God can do anything, you know,” St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.” (Ephesians 3:20, *The Message*) The Spirit working deeply and gently within us, so that we *participate* with Christ in his healing, life-giving work, as *together* we offer one cold cup of water at a time.

AMEN