

Proper 8A 2020 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 today's Gospel, we come to the end of Jesus' *extended* instructions to his 12 disciples as he sends them out on a mission trip to do 2 things: to proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and to restore people to health and wholeness. As he is wrapping up his instructions, he says to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me..." Or, as other translations read, "Whoever *receives* you *receives* me..."

Now, I suggest that there are two ways we can understand what Jesus is telling his disciples here; and both ways are helpful.

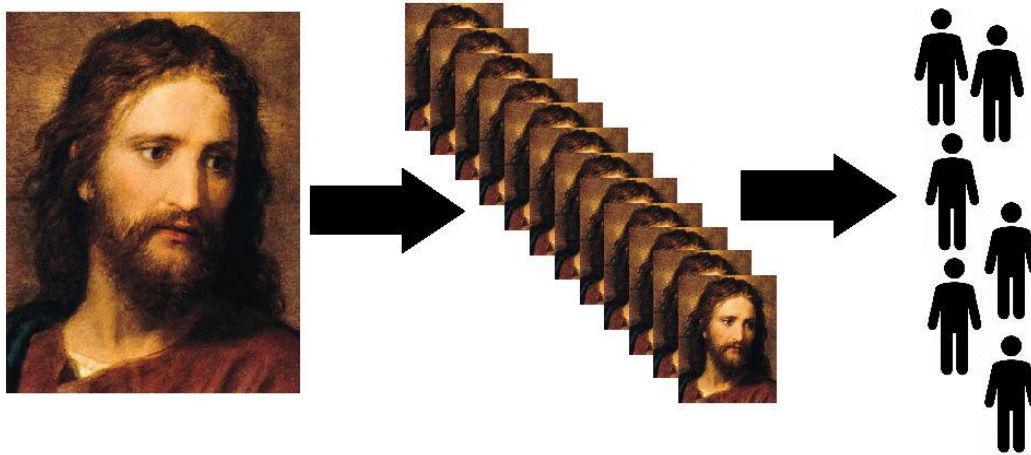
The first is a static, representational understanding: Jesus gives the disciples the authority to serve in his stead; they become, as it were, the presence of Jesus.

The concept was familiar, for in ancient Jewish culture, business, legal, or social transactions were sometimes mediated through a person called a *saliah*, which we might roughly translate as "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, for example, the King of Israel sent his *saliah*, his ambassador, to sign a treaty with a foreign king, 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".¹

Jesus is sending his disciples as his *saliahs*, his ambassadors, to be his presence to the people, and to act in his stead; just as Jesus, in a sense, was sent to earth as a *saliah* for his Heavenly Father.

We might envision this static interpretation as Jesus sending out 12 replicas of himself; for they **are** the presence of Jesus to those to whom they are sent.

Disciples as "Saliyahs," Ambassadors



As St. Paul wrote, “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20) We were created in the image and likeness of God. Each of us is meant to be, as C.S. Lewis said, a “Little Christ;” and we are to treat others, welcome others, receive others, as if they were the presence of Christ (because they are!). This is what I am calling a “representational” understanding of today’s Gospel text.

But there is a *second* way of understanding Jesus’ words which is not static or representational, but rather dynamic and fluid. Rather than the disciples being *representatives* of Christ, **this** model sees the followers of Christ as open *channels* of Christ’s dynamic, loving, and healing spirit flowing through them and out into the world, and into and through those who are open to *receive* that divine spirit. “Make me a *channel* of your peace,” we sang a couple of Sundays ago. In opening to the Spirit of God, which requires surrendering as much as possible our own egos, we become channels of God’s peace, God’s grace, God’s healing, God’s love, God’s Spirit.



A few verses before today's Gospel reading, Jesus gave instructions that his disciples were to travel lightly, and rely on the hospitality of those to whom they were being sent. He told them, "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff..." (Matthew 10:9-10) The disciples who are sent out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and bring healing and wholeness arrive at the towns to which they are being sent totally at the mercy of the hospitality of the townsfolk. The disciples are literally penniless, without even sandals on their feet. And not only is it very *uncertain* whether they *will*, in fact, *receive* hospitality from the strangers to whom they are being sent; Jesus has told them, just a few verses earlier, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves... and you will be hated by all because of my name." (Matthew 10:16-22) It appears that, for the disciples, hospitality may be in short supply.

My friends, if you are at all like me, your tendency, in listening to today's Gospel, is to hear Jesus' words as saying to us, "I want you to be hospitable." And that is, indeed, one of the strong messages in today's short passage. But if the *only* message we hear is that **we** are the ones who are supposed to be offering hospitality, that assumes that **we** are in the more privileged position. "Yes, I know I should be offering a cup of cold water to the 'little ones' in our society today." And so, after taking today's Gospel passage to heart, I decide I should donate more to Loaves and Fishes. It's very magnanimous of me.

But you and I are disciples of Jesus, and Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel are **not** the ones who seem to be *offering* hospitality; they seem to be the ones *receiving* hospitality (or not!).

Vanderbilt Professor Emilie Townes, the first Black woman to be elected president of the American Academy of Religion, offers some insight into today's Gospel passage. She writes, "The one who welcomes often continues to be at

home and retains a good measure of control; this causes us to welcome those who are dispossessed, the little ones, into our **own** worlds on terms we ourselves have crafted. It is [then] impossible to develop the reciprocal relationships expressed in this passage, for the host has near absolute control.”²

Why did we not notice this? Notice the fact that the disciples, who are penniless and shoeless and are thus **totally** dependent on the *material* hospitality of the townsfolk to whom they are sent, why did we not notice that, nonetheless, they have a *powerful* hospitality of their own to offer the *townsfolk*. It is a hospitality in which the *giver* is **not** in a higher position of power, wealth, or social privilege. Rather, the giver, like the disciples in today’s Gospel, and like Jesus, offers a hospitality of spirit and soul.

A hospitality of spirit and soul.

You see, the disciples are **told** that they are being sent out “like sheep into the midst of wolves... and [they] will be hated by all because [they bear the likeness of Jesus].” (Matt. 10:16, 22) And yet they still go! They knowingly expose themselves to being “hated by all.” They make their spirits open and vulnerable to the very people who may well treat them like wolves treat sheep. *Why?!* Because Christ lives in them; *and* they have become channels of God’s grace and love, which always flows toward the “little ones:” those who are suffering; those who are lonely; those who are hungry; those whom society has pushed to the margins; those who have stored up treasures on earth but are poor in the treasures of heaven. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Hospitality of spirit and soul. It is the kind of hospitality which loves the enemy. The kind of hospitality that opens the door when a disciple knocks, and rather than seeing a shoeless, penniless beggar, sees instead the face of Christ and receives the flow of God’s grace and love pouring through the channel of the disciple’s heart. It is the kind of hospitality that receives, accepts, includes all people; that refuses to stereotype, pre-judge and reject others in our words and attitudes. The hospitality of spirit and soul refuses to harbor any belief in our own exceptionalism, or to embrace any sense of being better than others. It is always willing to listen, understand and welcome the stranger. Hospitality of spirit and soul is a *reciprocal* kind of hospitality, in which each person knows she has something to offer as well as something she needs to receive. It is the kind of hospitality which allowed Jesus, after having been flogged and beaten and crucified, to nonetheless keep his heart open toward his torturers and pray, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

Hospitality of spirit and soul is something we can learn and practice, as we seek to identify more with the image and likeness of God within us than with our individual ego or tribal identity (of whatever sort); and as we keep the channel of our heart open to the flow of God’s mercy, God’s grace, God’s love, God’s Spirit.

Allow me to finish with the words of Emile Townes:

“The hospitality rooted in compassionate welcome is both a practice and a spiritual discipline in which we discover that by offering hospitality we may be welcoming something or someone new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives. This requires us to recognize another's gifts and vulnerabilities, the need for shelter and sustenance, and encourages us to open up our worldviews and perspectives as well as our hearts and souls.

“As we extend hospitality to others, we may well find that we experience new insights and hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions. Such witness can [transform us] so that we become new beings. This is the reward we will not lose.”

AMEN

- 1 K.H. Rengstorf, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1:414-20
- 2 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1* (Propers 3-16), WordSearch edition
- 3 *Feasting, ibid.*