

A Cup of Cold Water

Matthew 9:36-10:1; 40-42

Preached April 26, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:36-42)

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. (Matthew 10:1)

"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." (Matthew 10:40-42)

Introduction. Charlie Plumb and his wife were seated in a restaurant when a stranger who had been seated near them, walked up to him and said, "You're Plumb." Charlie affirmed the stranger's words. The stranger continued, "You flew jet fighters in Vietnam and were on the Aircraft Carrier, Kitty Hawk. You were shot down and parachuted out and spent 6 years as a prisoner of war." Plumb responded, "How in the world did you know that?" The stranger responded, "I packed your parachute." As the conversation progressed, the stranger said, "I guess it worked."

Plumb came face to face with a sailor who was hardly known and performed an unseen background job that ended up helping to save his life. In a short conversation, Plumb came to understand the importance of a team and the faithful completion of even the seemingly most insignificant job.

This sermon is intended to launch our EMIM campaign where every participant

at First-Centenary is asked to commit to some type of ministry in the life of the church. Some may have a glamorous role as a fighter pilot. Others may work in the background as "parachute packers." All the roles are vital to the church and our mission and teamwork is critical.

Jesus – Team work model. During his earthly ministry, Jesus discovered the importance of both team work and every type of ministry. Our scripture lesson this morning is part of an experience where Jesus discovered the importance of both team work and each person doing their part. Out of that experience, Jesus developed a system of ministry.

While traveling from town to town, village to village, Jesus encountered many people with a common malady. They faced significant difficulties that in their own strength they lacked the resources to conquer. Matthew described these as being "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." There was no one to care for them, show them the way to deliverance and to provide for their needs.

What would Jesus find if he were to walk through our city or our neighborhood? In some of our neighborhoods, he would find many just fighting for survival, trying to supply basic needs. He would find random violence and homes filled with fear. In other neighborhoods, he would find people who are part of the most prosperous culture in human history. Yet many long for meaning and purpose in life. Many wonder, "Is this all there is?" In those neighborhoods, over 50 % of marriages are likely to fail. Some with lots of resources find themselves tempted to gain more by dishonest means. Many are lonely and so afraid – afraid of losing what they have, losing their health, losing their friends and family. I think Jesus would find the same sorts of things he found in his world.

When Jesus saw these things in his world, he did not wring his hands and say, "Woe is me. We are going down the tubes." Matthew tells us he was "moved with compassion." The word translated

"compassion" is one that indicates a deep seated emotion. It is that feeling that springs forth from deep within us. It is the emotion of favor and love that springs forth from our inner parts.

It was that deep compassion that motivated him to take a course of action that continues to impact people today, including you and me. Today, if you are a follower of Jesus or are considering becoming a follower, your journey began with Jesus' compassion and action. What he set up and passed on has been passed through every generation of disciples and has reached us. Without these, the Jesus movement would probably have ended at Calvary.

Jesus called his followers at that point to pray for God to send harvesters. But he did not stop there. He called together 12 who had been following him and gave them a mission of deliverance and healing. He instructed them regarding what they were to do and what they should expect. Then he sent them into the surrounding villages. Jesus sent his team onto the field to play the game.

He established an intentional system to serve those who were harassed and helpless. He built and sent out a team to multiply his ministry. As a human, Jesus could not be in all the towns and meet all the people. He was limited by his humanity. He understood his followers had to carry out the ministry.

When I was in seminary, I served a smaller membership church that averaged around 25 when I arrived. I spent 6 years there as pastor and was blessed to see it grow to an attendance over 100. During those years, I did over 90% of the pastoral care and new member cultivation, nearly all of the preaching and worship planning, attended all committee meetings, taught a Sunday School class and weekly Bible study and often mowed the grass. Now there were many lay people who were very active and served faithfully but I did most of the pastoral stuff. Today, it is not humanly possible for me to do the same level of those activities here at First-Centenary because there are not enough hours in the day and I do not have the

level of energy that would be required. I understand that if the ministry both within and beyond this church is to be done, it is necessary that we work as a team.

You are important to the life and ministry of Christ's Church. Out of his compassion for you, Christ sent others to minister to your needs and now Christ calls you and me to serve.

Welcoming – a sacramental encounter.

In Matthew 10, Jesus shares with the twelve where they are to go and what they are to do. He explains what they will encounter. The second part of our scripture lesson is Jesus' closing statements before sending them out. I find his words to be intriguingly informative.

Jesus talks about the significance of welcoming those who serve. He says, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me – if one welcomes a preacher who is serving, that person receives a preacher's reward." Earlier in the passage, Jesus told his disciples that if any failed to welcome them, they were to go to the next place where they would be welcomed. He also indicated that some would be hostile toward them because of their ministry.

Welcoming people, particularly friends, has long played an important role in most cultures. Most of us know what it is to be welcomed into the company of others or to welcome others. Here, welcoming involves two important aspects. First is hospitality – showing common courtesy for a guest and expressing gladness to have the guest in one's presence. The second is receiving and accepting what the person offers in ministry.

Jesus' words about welcoming those who serve him act both as an encouragement to all who serve and a warning. As a warning, each of us should be aware that there are those both within and outside of the church who will not welcome what we do in the name of Christ. This can be true when one attempts to serve in a church context. I have witnessed some being attacked by those in a church for doing acts of service that may not meet the standards or methods of the critics. When any of us serve, there is the risk that some will not welcome what we do, even some within the church fellowship.

The other side of the coin is very encouraging. Jesus affirms that those who welcome us as we serve are, in effect, welcoming him and welcoming the one who sent him. We are serving as Jesus' ambassadors. There is a sacramental aspect present when we serve others. Those who receive and welcome the ministry are experiencing Jesus. Christ, who is with us in "spirit," is experienced in flesh through acts of service that others receive.

When a person receives the ministry offered by an usher or listens, processes and applies a lesson shared by a SS teacher or enjoys the company of a shut-in visitor or enjoys the blooming flowers and flowering trees on this lot or enjoys food served on Wednesday evening, they are in a real way experiencing Jesus. Christ is present in our acts of service. We become the hands, feet and mouthpiece for Jesus. When you serve, you provide others an opportunity to encounter the Jesus who loves them and has compassion toward them.

Every Monday morning, Marie would be present at the volunteer desk in the church office to handle a variety of tasks: sort our attendance registrations alphabetically, identify first time worshipers, process prayer requests and list those who had signed up for the Wednesday evening meal. When needed, she would answer the phone. While few in the church knew of the particular tasks she did, what she did made a difference. When I would arrive, she always had a big hug for me. Marie's service and presence was for the church a time when Jesus was present. (Do you know we have several of those Marie's here at First-Centenary?)

A cup of cold water. Jesus' final comments in this discourse take us a bit farther in the importance of service. He says that whoever gives a cup of water to these "little ones" will not lose their reward.

If you have lived in Chattanooga during July and August, you know the value of a cup of cold water. When you are offered a drink in a restaurant, in someone's home or by a vendor on the street, it is meaningful. A small act such as offering a drink can mean much.

It is interesting that in our text there is a bit of ambiguity as to who are the "little ones." There is a strong possibility the "little ones" are other disciples who are serving in Christ's name. Giving water is providing for them small acts that aid them in their ministry.

I am always amazed when I think of the number of people who make worship services happen here at First-Centenary. There are a few of us who each week stand in the spotlight and are heard. Of course not every person can be in that position. There are many who play critical roles that do so in the background – choir/music team that have worked hard to lead music, an altar guild who has set the table and filled the candles and tidied the Nave, people who have cleaned the pews and filled the pads, ushers who have prepared for your coming, people in the sound booth, people running cameras and directing the broadcast, people who have cleaned this space and set it up, people who will help with guest followup and checking on those who have not been here in a while and of course some to collect the money and provides me with a bottle of water. Every one of these jobs is critical and contributes to our worship. These provide "cups of cold water" necessary to make worship happen.

Another possible meaning of "little ones" loops us back to where we began. Jesus saw the people were like sheep without a shepherd. They were little ones who had great need. Later in this gospel, Matthew shares about the judgment of Christ when he separates the sheep and the goats. The sheep are commended because they care for Jesus. They wondered when they had done this, and Jesus told them they had when they had done it for the "least of these."

When simple acts of ministry, maybe random acts of kindness, take place, rewards come to God's servants.

Invitation. Jesus' compassion led him to set up a system that built a team for ministry and served. All on his team played an important part in ministry. All of us are beneficiaries of his compassion and action. Now he calls us to serve and be part of the team. Will you give yourself in ministry?