

“Just Reward”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰[Jesus continued,] “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever 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; ⁴²and 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.”

Our lectionary reading today is a direct continuation of last week’s passage, which you may remember was a difficult one, filled with all sorts of ominous warnings and dire outcomes and challenging statements: the life of the Christian missionary-disciple would be hard and require much commitment from those who followed Jesus.

Now, we have this little coda: good things await those who welcome the prophets.

So, a question: Why was this lopped off from last week’s lesson? Why not add this welcome news to the threatening words?

Think about it, and the answer is pretty obvious: either reading would lessen the impact of the other. People needed to hear the truth about the demands of the Christian life. None of it could be sugarcoated. Likewise, people should know about the blessing that will come to those who follow the way of Jesus.

So, now what? Just what is this passage trying to tell us? There’s a great deal here in three short verses, and it can tell us a lot. We need to be careful in interpreting this text, for it depends on context and knowing just what Matthew was talking about.

When Jesus talks about “prophets” and “the righteous” and “little ones,” he isn’t just tossing around words with abandon. Prophets in the early Church were understood to be itinerant preachers, people who would go from town to town sharing the Good News. The righteous were those who indeed lived life in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. And the little ones—ah, there’s a bit of a challenge: they either referred to the laity in the Church, with the prior two categories understood to be the leaders, or they referred to the poor, the least prominent, the people who are all too frequently shunted aside. Elsewhere in the Gospels, we know “little ones” to be children, who in many ways, especially in the

world of 2,000 years ago, were treated as people to be seen and not heard. But in truth, all of this is something of a distraction. For what we really need to know is spelled out in verse 40: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Here Jesus is identifying himself with the Father and shows the bond that exists between the believer and the one who made them. When we welcome one of these people—prophet, righteous, little one—we welcome Jesus and, in turn, welcome God. That is something anybody can do. Anybody is able to offer hospitality and, in doing so, is going to receive a reward.

Oftentimes, we think that what we are being asked as Christians to do requires heroic action on our part. Here we are told otherwise: a cup of cold water will do the trick.

Easy, right? Just pour a glass, hand it over, and one’s work is done.

But how easy is it, really, to share water? In Jesus’ day, one had to go the well in the morning and draw off what one needed. A jug of water is heavy. So, there might not be lots of water to share when a stranger comes by, particularly at a late hour.

And what of today? One could just pour a glass from the kitchen faucet or hand over a bottle of water. Simple, right? Well, not really. In today’s COVID-19 world, many of us are wary of those who aren’t wearing masks, who are strangers, and whose connections and contacts are thus unknown. And then there is the long-standing concern that strangers might be dangerous.

Now, all of this might be overblown. It’s just a stinkin’ glass of water, right? But I think it’s worth reflecting on how many people, and that might include any of us, can find excuses for not doing the right thing. It’s inconvenient. It’s risky. It’s frightening. Rationalization is much easier.

Jesus knew that. And Matthew, who told Jesus’ story, knew that. His Gospel was written at a time of tension in the Jewish community, in the aftermath, most likely, of the destruction of the Temple. The Romans were no longer just occupiers; they were a real and present danger. For the Jewish Christians in the Church, this was an especially perilous time. To openly profess the faith risked condemnation, ostracism, even worse by those one knew. And if the religious authorities didn’t get you, well, the Romans would.

Matthew wanted his readers to know that the risks would be rewarded on high, that God noticed what we did. And so, this is what Jesus tells his followers. This story was not only intended for the Apostles but for all the members of the early Church, and yes, by extension, for you and me.

Being faithful isn't always easy. Sure, we go to church—which in some ways is easier than ever before, now that we can worship from the comfort of our own homes. And yes, we give money and time. But how many of us are consciously trying to model Christian behavior in our workplace or our schools or the gym or anywhere else we go? And by that I don't mean passing out leaflets or walking around wearing a sandwich board, though I have to admit to a grudging admiration for those who are so committed to their faith that they are willing to do something they must know bugs the living daylights out of so many others.

No, what I'm thinking about is acting as a Christian, someone who follows Jesus, should act: being kind, sharing with others, refraining from snark, turning the other cheek, avoiding temptation, setting aside time for prayer and for fellowship.

What this passage reminds us is that when we do even the smallest thing, we have the possibility of meeting Jesus—and, frankly, we don't know what Jesus looked like, do we?

I remember back in business school, thirty years ago, walking along 40th Street from the Port Authority terminal, on the far West Side of Manhattan, to Park Avenue, where my office was located. As on any morning, there were lots of people on the sidewalks, which in today's world seems like a bit of a fever dream. This being New York, people were wearing all sorts of clothing: suits, t-shirts, track suits, dresses, whatever they had.

It was around 8:30, and the city was in the throes of rush hour, with people scurrying off to work. I remember crossing a street, and there, by the subway entrance, was a man lying on the ground, and people were just stepping over him and going their ways. I'd like to say this was a moment when I did something incredibly generous, that I knelt to check on this stranger, to see how he was or how I might help him. But I didn't. I looked at him for a moment, felt uncomfortable, and then continued to my office.

Was that Jesus? I don't know. But I do know that he was one of God's children.

That brief moment on a summer's morning has haunted me for three decades, and I'm sure it is a memory that will be with me all my days.

I could offer up the usual bromides and observations, the clichés that are all too often trotted out when discussing situations like this: how could we tolerate a dirty, apparently homeless man lying on the street in the wealthiest city in the richest country in the history of the world? It was disturbing, and it was wrong. But as Jesus reminded us in Matthew 26, we will always have the poor with us.

I don't think that Jesus was expressing resignation when he said this but was issuing a challenge to the faithful: what are we going to do about the problem?

This passage is a reminder that we don't need to fix the world in one fell swoop. Life doesn't work that way. But we can each do something, and we can each take a step to help. And when we do that, we may meet Jesus.

One of the things I've always appreciated about our church is how the congregation supports the Open Door Ministry. We get all kinds coming to us for help. While Brian handles the majority of interactions, I've had my share over the years. Women, men, the desperately needy, the proud, the belligerent, the diffident. Just like humanity at large, these people represent the spectrum of the human condition. We help with no questions asked, no expressions of judgment, which I will confess isn't always easy.

I find myself wondering about the people who want food cards but come in smelling like a tobacco barn, or those who seek help with gas while they are driving huge pickup trucks that are not models of fuel economy. I want to say something, but don't. There is enough judgmentalism going on in the world, and I honestly don't expect my words to have any effect beyond annoyance. So, we help. And we do exercise some discretion, so your gifts aren't just being thrown to the wind.

And there's always this morning's lesson. When we help those in need, the least of these, we are helping Jesus. The idea that Jesus would be a smoker who drives a gas guzzler may seem odd, but I think that reveals more about my own prejudices than it does about God.

Remember the sheep and the goats? Matthew 25 tells us about the end of time and the judgment of the nations. In verses 35 and 36, we read of Jesus saying, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." And then he tells the supposedly righteous who wondered about their fates that since they ignored the hungry, the thirsty, and the like, they would receive nothing.

Again, we are told the sobering truth by Jesus: the choices we make, the allegiances we proclaim, will be noted and they will have consequences. At the time Matthew's Gospel was written, the incentives to deny Christ and the Church were great. The evangelist wanted to remind his audience of the reward for following the path of the Son: a deep, intimate relationship with God.

There is a long-running debate in church circles whether we should be focused on a "personal" relationship with God or one that is corporate. Frankly, I do not know why we are even discussing this: clearly, we need both. We each have a tie to the God who made us, and as members of communities in which we live—society, the Church—we work in and through institutions. The Holy Spirit was a gift to each of those gathered in

Jerusalem that long-ago Pentecost, and it is the force that animates all in the Church even to this day.

If there is one thing I would take issue with in this passage, it is the talk of a “reward.” It is not as if we do something and then God chooses to give us something. We Protestants have long been wary of works-righteousness, the idea that, essentially, we can buy God off by doing what we believe to be good deeds. His gifts are freely given to us, acts of unmerited grace that tell us much about our Creator—and that should help us to understand this passage. Yes, we will receive a “reward” for showing hospitality to the prophet, the righteous, or the little ones, but not because we have somehow placated the deity but because generosity begets generosity. By sharing with others, we open ourselves to receiving the freely given grace of the Lord.

Do the right thing, Matthew encouraged his readers, and you will meet Jesus, and therefore, you will meet God. What more could we want out of life? Think of the people who have most influenced you for the better; think of how theirs might well have been the face of God.

The Holy Spirit makes itself known through the women and men of the Church. Just think: You may have met God—and through you, others might have, too.

Talk about a reward!

Talk about a gift!

Talk about a blessing!

And all for sharing a glass of water, a sympathetic ear, or a little bit of hospitality.