

Welcome
Matthew 10:40-42
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Jan McGilliard
Missional Commissioned Pastor

Our gospel lesson for today is brief and pithy. It's actually the tail end of a longer discourse in which Jesus prepares his disciples for their mission. Here are a few verses that set the stage for this morning's gospel reading: Jesus tells his disciples, "Don't go among the Gentiles or into a Samaritan city. Go instead to the lost sheep, the people of Israel. As you go, make this announcement: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and throw out demons." "Don't take a backpack for the road or two shirts or sandals or a walking stick. Whatever city or village you go into, find somebody in it who is worthy and stay there until you go on your way. "If anyone refuses to welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or city." Jesus warns the disciples that the way forward won't be easy, but they must not fear those who would persecute them, for everything will be revealed. Jesus says, "What I say to you in the darkness, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, announce from the rooftops."

Now listen for what God is saying to us today from Matthew 10:40-42: "Those who receive you are also receiving me, and those who receive me are receiving the one who sent me. Those who receive a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Those who receive a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Many of us have participated in mission trips to various parts of the world...where culture and customs are vastly different from our own. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner may not resemble meals of our own making but are nevertheless nourishing and filling. We are dependent on our host's hospitality for our basic needs and safety. Without that, we are vulnerable, and to be vulnerable is to be open to things that make us feel uncomfortable, even fearful. Jesus would say, "Never mind. Go and have this experience.

"Those who receive you are also receiving me, and those who receive me are receiving the one who sent me." This seems to me a high calling. Whatever our purpose in making the journey to poor countries rife with corruption and danger, we begin by being kind and compassionate. We must depend on and trust God for the details. If we have the courage to go, we will undoubtedly be changed by the experience.

In 2012 Cathy McCullough and I took a group of students to Haiti. We were hosted by Haiti Outreach Ministries, staying in a compound that included a church, a school, a medical clinic, a sewing ministry, and guest accommodation for those who came to learn and volunteer. Our main task was to help with the building of simple houses just across the street...moving cinder blocks, mixing cement, and interacting with the villagers. Most of the children attended school just across the street, appearing in school uniforms made by the seamstresses in the compound. Once they returned home for the day, the uniforms were removed in favor of simple clothing or nakedness. They gathered in little bunches around all the strangers in their midst, seeking attention, wanting to play games.

Isabelle, our only African American student, was a very quiet and seemingly shy participant. What we watched unfold was nothing short of amazing. The little ones hovered around her, begging her to play with them. We realized that for the first time, Isabelle was being surrounded by people that looked just like her. She had found her niche and was totally immersed in their well-being. Isabelle was being transformed into a confident, caring disciple of Christ. Her smiles and demeanor throughout the trip rubbed off on everyone. Those little ones believed that Isabelle had come just for them, and she had! What they didn't realize was how much their very presence meant to a solitary young woman. They were demonstrating the love of Christ for the stranger among them, and Isabelle was returning that love tenfold. Christ's mission for the disciples would likely involve risk. Whenever we involve ourselves in a mission project, we know it could fail, be met with hostility, or worse. There will be highs and lows and re-thinking along the way. We will learn from our mistakes and feel defeated. But Jesus reminds us to go and do it anyway. Otherwise justice and mercy are not served, and Christ's love is not shared.

Many of you know that I sponsor a Haitian student named Diego. I got to know him briefly on two different mission trips when we visited his village of Cange, home of Dr. Paul Farmer's tireless work to bring free medical care to the Haitian people. Thanks to the Episcopal Church, this village had a hospital, a school, a church, and a guest house for visitors. Diego would show up every evening to schmooze with the students and leaders. He wanted what our students had...a college education. He was raised by his great grandmother, who died at the age of 102. He never knew his parents, and was only vaguely aware of his two much older siblings. He tenaciously kept in touch with me and others, hoping for some sort of sponsorship. It started with money for a passport and visa to allow him to travel to the Dominican Republic. It is easier to qualify for college in the DR than in Haiti, so he set out to share living space with a friend already finishing a degree there. At some point, I had to commit, to trust God for the details, and to trust that Diego wasn't taking me for a joy ride. I decided to risk it. With help from Mark Hare, our mission co-worker, who then lived in the Dominican Republic, we were able to advise Diego in useful ways.

He spent a year learning Spanish, then enrolled in the public university in Santo Domingo. That was five years ago. He now has his certification in medical imaging, and with a few more courses, he will graduate in the top 10% of his class. Lord have mercy, he's talking about graduate school. It is easy to make the leap to the message of Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me." Members of this church have long been involved in mission projects that speak to this Gospel message about helping everyone without judgment. Think about how, when, and why the Holy Spirit nudged you into action. Shane Claiborne, a well-known and avid evangelist for Christ, keynoted at the Montreat College Conference, and he inspired several adults from this congregation to consider how they could do more back home. They returned, poised to do more to help the vulnerable in our community.

The PRAYS Team, spelled PRAYS, was born under the leadership of Joe Ivers and Brenda Roberts. PRAYS stands for Presbyterians Ready at Your Service – volunteers helping those in need in very practical ways. In a span of six years, 200 projects were carried out, and Joe shared with me he'd never been happier or more fulfilled. The Woodchucks prepare wood from all around our community to provide firewood for folks in need throughout the winter. They deliver some 200 loads of firewood each year. Those who participate know that the need for warmth in winter is just scratching the surface. At holiday time, bags of food are gathered up to deliver to many who also

receive wood. In response to the death of a well-known homeless man, Janne Mathes and others started To Our House, which provides shelter, food, laundry, and hospitality to homeless men and some women. Many churches and volunteers are involved in unique and various ways to provide for their needs. At BPC, volunteers offer to meet with folks in need of resources to improve their circumstances.

VICCC provides childcare for low-income families, and members of this church were instrumental in its early days and beyond. During the pandemic our congregation was blessed by efforts of Loy Campbell to teach us how best to interact with folks with memory loss, ways of extending welcome and hospitality to a growing population. Mask making was staged out of this church to provide protection for a wide range of people. Scott and Melanie Smith are involved in prison ministry, helping those who are out to have a place to live and help to find employment. Kathy Carpenter meets with them to lead devotions. Many have been and are involved in helping immigrant families that have come to live in Blacksburg. The list goes on and on, but one thing is certain. The Holy Spirit is alive and well in this place, with room for all to participate.

Our scripture says, "I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded." When I think of giving a cup of cold water, I immediately think of Synod of Living Waters, that trains partners to work together in covenant to provide communities with a source of clean water. They work all over the world. And Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, working to bring relief following hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, and tornados, to name a few.

And let's not forget the efforts of members and friends of this church who reach out in ways often unseen and unheard of to support one another: offering rides to appointments, treatments, and choir; offering a listening ear to those who might otherwise have no one; cooking and delivering meals for those who are in treatment, just home from hospital, or grieving a loss; hosting visitors to the church; helping sort through a lifetime of belongings to move to a better living situation. That list is almost endless and ongoing.

Our world is in great need of cups of cold water, especially those who have been separated from family, church, community, and country. It's hard to imagine being in their place. So, it's important to begin with kindness and compassion, leaving behind judgment.

This is the season of Ordinary Time, and it seems fitting to celebrate ordinary acts of kindness and care that yield extraordinary results.

We are indeed called as Christ's disciples to offer hospitality in large ways and small according to our gifts, to practice mutual dependence, trusting in God for the details. May we be reminded of all this and more as we share the sacrament of Holy Communion. Amen.

~ Jan McGilliard, 2023