

Pentecost Proper 8 July 29, 2014. On the Gospel: Matthew 10:40-42 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

When I first read today's gospel passage it was the opening words that grabbed me first: "whoever welcomes you welcomes me". When we are about the business of God we carry within us the presence of God. It's Paul's metaphor of the Body turned outward. We are not to be understood as the Body of Christ only in the context of making a differentiation between the individual ministries each of us is called to fulfil, we're to be understood as the Body of Christ when we are out and about in the everyday world – as long, of course, as we are living out the commitments we've made as a part of the body.

These words are Jesus' final instructions in the sermon that - as we heard last week - is full of dark premonitions about persecution and suffering and family divisions, so the sudden shift in gears is a little startling.

So, for me, was this rather odd reference to a cup of water. It's almost off-handed, except that Jesus adds one word that changes everything. It's a word added for emphasis, to underscore how something that might seem at first to be insignificant is anything but, is, in fact, really really important.

Think about it for a moment: all the language today talks about relationship, and hospitality, about welcome and embrace. In that context, the one extra word takes on a central role - for me at least - in this passage.

That word? "Even: "...whoever gives **even** a cup of cold water-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

One of the unfortunate problems Christianity has created for all those of us who are at the distant end of the river of faith from these originating events is the way it has emphasized individual figures - has held them up - most especially for the things they have done.

That makes it difficult for us when it comes to our own ministries. It's too easy for us to be hard on ourselves - to lose heart - because the examples we're given just seem insurmountable for ordinary people. These heroes of faith are Titans, some who gave away all they had and lived in abject poverty, or who fearlessly gave their lives for what they believed in. Discipleship is presented as something that requires grand gestures, or amazing, admirable feats or huge sacrifice.

So we don't try at all.

It seems to me that Jesus was battling just such a problem among his disciples. It was probably for the same reasons, too: his faith had the same sorts of towering figures in its history - like Jeremiah, for instance, or Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Deborah, Ruth, Miriam. Who could possibly live up to their profound, faith-filled examples?

And, of course, Jesus was battling his own image with his followers - Jesus the healer, the

worker of miracles, the prophet who, like Jeremiah, was re-defining his Jewish faith tradition.

So his closing words to these disciples he was about to send out with a mission to change the world were words to remind them that faithfulness to the call of God comes in all shapes and sizes, that it doesn't have to be in grand gestures or super-human feats of compassion.

Sometimes, Jesus says, the most profound expression of discipleship is in giving someone who asks a cold cup of water.

Sometimes, the most profound expression of discipleship is nothing more than 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 who can't drive. Or volunteering at the local food bank. Or making a donation to an agency like Episcopal Relief and Development, or Helping Hand.

Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. In our personal lives the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness go largely unnoticed. But what they do is tend the relationships that are most important to us, care for the relationships and for the people that are in them.

The same is true of our lives of faith. They're composed of a thousand small gestures that largely go unnoticed.

Jesus is saying that there's no such thing as a small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the world God loves so much.

There's this great story I came across last week by a writer named Loren Eiseley. She told the story of a man who spent hours on a beach which was covered with stranded star-fish. He was picking them up one-by-one and throwing them back into the water. When he was asked why he was doing that he simply replied that if the starfish didn't get back in the water soon, they would dry out and die. The questioner observed that the beach was strewn with thousands of starfish; how could he possibly hope to make any difference. And the man simply replied: "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world."

At some time that hasn't been revealed to us our faith tradition says, Jesus will redeem all in love, fix all damage, heal all hurts, and wipe the tears from every eye. But that's not now. In this intermediate time we can - and should - devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large.

We don't need to save the world! That is a promised action of God. But we are called simply to start and continue the process of saving the world, beginning with caring for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed. "Even a cold cup of 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.

Each 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.

I'll bet we're already participating in those saving acts of compassion and mercy! We are already working in countless and myriad ways to make this world God loves so much a little better, a little more trustworthy, a little more joyful.

Jesus words are for us an invitation. To just do another little act of love, another little act of mercy, another little act of compassion. In so doing we continue to participate in the transformation of our world for good, for God.       AMEN.