

“A Ministry of Refreshment”

Sunday, June 28, 2020

First Christian Church, Murray, KY

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSV) ~ ⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² 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.”

“For Love In a Time of Conflict”

by John O’Donohue

When the gentleness between you hardens
And you fall out of your belonging with each other,
May the depths you have reached hold you still.

When no true word can be said, or heard,
And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,
When even the silence has become raw and torn,
May you hear again an echo of your first music.

When the weave of affection starts to unravel
And anger begins to sear the ground between you,
Before this weather of grief invites
The black seed of bitterness to find root,
May your souls come to kiss.

Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,
To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,
Reach out with sure hands
To take the chalice of your love,
And carry it carefully through this echoless waste
Until this winter pilgrimage leads you
Towards the gateway to spring

John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, Doubleday, 2008, p. 32.

I would like to begin by sharing with you a story called “The Water of Life” by Kate Compston:

“Three people were searching for the water of life; hoping to drink from it and live forever.

The first was a warrior: he reckoned the water of life would be very mighty—a torrent or a rapid—so he went in full armour, with all his weapons, believing he could force the water to yield to him.

The second was an enchantress: she reckoned the water of life would be very magical—perhaps a whirlpool or a geyser, something she would need to manipulate with spells—so she went in her long star-spangled robe, hoping to outwit the water.

The third was a trader: he reckoned the water of life would be very costly—a fountain of pearl-drops or diamonds, perhaps—so he loaded his clothes and purses with money, hoping to be able to buy the water.

When the travelers reached their destination, they found they had all been quite wrong about the water of life.

It wasn’t a torrent to be intimidated by force.

It wasn’t a whirlpool to be charmed by spells.

And it wasn’t a foundation of pearl-drops or diamonds to be bought for money.

It was just a tiny, sparkling spring; its benefits were absolutely free—but, of course, you had to kneel to drink from it.

This caused the seekers great consternation.

The warrior was in full armour and couldn’t bend.

The enchantress had on her long magic robe, and if that became soiled it would lose its power.

The trader was so loaded with money that if he did no more than incline his head, coins would start rolling away into corners and crevices.

All dressed up, the three could not lower themselves to drink from the spring of the water of life.

There was only one solution.

So the warrior laid aside his armour.

The enchantress laid aside her magic robe.

And the trader laid aside the clothes he had stuffed with money.

And then each of them—naked—could kneel to drink from the water of life and receive its sweet, cool, startling benefits.”

(Kate Compston, “The Water of Life,” in *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, ed. Margaret Silf [Oxford: Lion Publishing, 20-03], pp. 94-95.)

In the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus, who had been out traveling from town to town in what surely was an exhausting ministry of teaching and healing, sending out his disciples to help him carry out his work. Before they left he gave them instructions that counter the value system embodied by the world's warrior people who try and impose their wills upon the world through force, or the enchantress people who try and manipulate, lie, and cheat, or the trader business people who think they can buy their way in the world through deal making and economic gain. The disciples were to reject these three standard ways of operating in the world and, instead, become totally vulnerable and transparent as they walked out in radical faith and trust, proclaiming that the Kingdom of Heaven had come near as they carried out Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing.

Like today, they were being sent out into was an unsettling and dangerous world marked by contagious diseases, poverty, economic unrest, warring factions and tribes, and fear and dislike of the stranger. Jesus didn't sugarcoat. He told them he was sending them out like 'sheep in the midst of wolves' (Matt 10:16). They were to travel light and take nothing with them: no gold, silver, or copper, no bag for your journey, no extra clothing, or staff. They were to humble themselves, take off everything that weighed them down and prevented them from kneeling to drink from the eternal living waters offered by Jesus, trusting in the confidence and power he bestowed on them, appreciating the gifts of hospitality and welcome they might encounter along the way.

In today's lectionary passage, after a long list of instructions, Jesus tells his disciples before sending them off: ⁴⁰ ***“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² 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, NRSV) The disciples are to go out as prophets who proclaim the justice and mercy of God in a world marked by systemic injustice, as righteous people who embody in word and deed the teachings of Jesus, and also as vulnerable “little ones,” who are just like everyone else they encounter.

While short, this passage is chock full of meaning and application as it points to two essential components of our Christian faith.

The first is the mystical component of our connection with Christ, with God, and with each other, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples and us (Mt 10:40): ***“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”*** In welcoming another person we are participating in a remarkable chain of love and grace that extends all the way back through Jesus to the God who sent him. Since we abide in and are sent by Christ, who abides in God through the power of the Holy Spirit, when we welcome others we are welcoming Christ! When others welcome us, they are welcoming Christ in us! That’s incredible as we recognize the sacred status of each person we encounter, applying the Namaste gesture of the Spirit in me greeting the Spirit in you.

This mystical component of our connection ‘in Christ’ leads us, secondly, to look at the ethical component of this scripture. Today’s scripture (Mt 10: 42) says that ***“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.”*** We are called not only to be ‘in Christ’ but also to act in a Christ-like manner as we go out and create a welcoming world where all are included and treated as we ourselves would like to be treated. We might say that our thirst for God is the thirst for God’s ways. Now this term “little ones” in relation to welcoming is central because it directly foreshadows the foundational verse in Matthew 25:34-36, 40 where Jesus talks about what it really means to follow him. Jesus does this by giving an illustration about the nations gathered before God at judgment day, when he says of the people who truly followed him that: ³⁴***“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. ... ⁴⁰ ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’***

Jesus calls upon us to reach out, welcome, and take care of the ‘least of these,’ who in our passage are referred to as the ‘little ones.’ As we reach out to the little ones, the least of these, those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned, we are actually reaching out to Jesus. And the reward the little ones are promised in today’s scripture is the same reward promised to the least of these, which is inheriting God’s eternal Kingdom.

Today's passage begs the question of what we most want or need. The warrior, the enchantress, and the trader in our opening story—representing three possible approaches to life—all were thirsting for the waters of eternal life. Today's passage also points to thirst, identifying that the one thing that the disciples needed above all was a cup of cold water. Jesus said: ***“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.”*** Note that it is not just a cup of water, but a cup of COLD water. Not just the water that might have been drawn from the village well early that morning, kept in a jar for hours, and now was warm and stagnant. Rather they were to offer a cup of cold water that took extra effort and an additional trip back to the village well, where one put one's bucket down deep to draw up the coldest, freshest water and then carried it back in the heat of the day, perhaps up a hill, to offer to one's guest. Offering such cold water represents a loving act of welcoming hospitality that can quench thirst.

THIRST. We all go through life thirsting. Sometimes it is physical thirst, as likely was experienced by the disciples who, sent out by Jesus, walked for long stretches along dusty roads in the heat of the Middle Eastern sun, with dry and parched lips hoping that they might receive a cup of cold water from friendly people at the next village well. When have you been thirsty? I remember experiencing what seemed like extreme physical thirst thirty years ago on June 25, 1990, when I was in labor all night and was not allowed to have any water at all for hours on end in case I might need a c-section. I was sweating so much I was becoming dehydrated but was denied all but a few ice chips that Russ was allowed to give me. After the hardest and most meaningful work in my life I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Yet, as I held her in my arms, the first words out of my mouth were “Water! Please give me some water!” I'm sure you all can remember a time in your life when you were overwhelmed by physical thirst, even becoming dehydrated, perhaps even so seriously that you had to be hospitalized. If not you, I'm sure you know someone this has happened to. We can live days without food, but water is the most essential component of our lives.

But there is another kind of thirst beyond physical thirst that runs even deeper. It is the kind of thirst that calls out for the refreshment not so much of our bodies but of our souls. Just as our bodies thirst for water, so our souls thirst for God. We remember Jesus telling the Samaritan woman at the well when they were talking about thirst and water (John 4:13-15) that: ***“Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*** Each of us has a thirst that only God can quench.

There are numerous beautiful passages in scripture that use the language of the soul thirsting for God. David, when he was out in the barren wilderness of Judah, sang:

*¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.* (Psalm 63:1, NRSV)

The author of Psalm 42:1-2, addressing those who were about to face exile, beautifully described such thirst:

*¹As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?* (Psalm 42:1-2, NRSV)

When shall people behold the face of God? Since our scripture today speaks to our mystical oneness as we are called to be the face of God one to the other, we might think about the kind of cold water we should be offering to quench the thirst of those at this time when we are faced with so much uncertainty, anxiety, and fear.

What kind of water are we offering others? Can anyone identify with these words from Psalm 69:20-21:

*²⁰ Insults have broken my heart,
so that I am in despair.
I looked for pity, but there was none;
and for comforters, but I found none.
²¹ They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.* (Psalm 69:20-21, NRSV)

Jesus certainly could have identified with this psalm. Did not Jesus, when he was hanging on the cross, cry out “I thirst.” (Jn. 19:28)? His was both physical thirst and spiritual thirst for God. And then, in response to this, they gave him bitter vinegar to drink. When we diminish or belittle others through our attitudes, actions, speech to their faces or behind their backs, or on social media because we see them as not of our tribe or as lesser than, are we not giving them bitter vinegar to drink?

Does the cup of water that you serve others contain bitterness? Or are you offering them a sweet chalice of love? Does the water that you serve others quench their thirst and refresh their souls? What kind of water would be welcoming and let others know that they are valued, seen, heard, important, worthy, the beloved Children of God? What kind of water would refresh their souls? The scriptures suggest that cold water drawn from our wellsprings that might quench others' thirst and refresh their souls must be flavored by the divine qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that flow through us by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. Above all, it should contain hope.

At this juncture in history when our society and discourse are so polarized and we have become entrenched in the echo chambers of our own petty little tribes to the extent that we no longer can see others as they truly are in 'in Christ,' let us take seriously what might be called a "Ministry of Refreshment." Is not our denomination's symbol a chalice? Yes, I know we usually think of it as containing wine or grape juice and pointing to the centrality of the Lord's Supper as we remember Jesus. But how about if today we thought of the chalice as containing the cup of cold water Jesus refers to when he calls upon us to reach out and refresh the bodies, minds, and souls of our overwhelmed, anxious, and hurting world. For Jesus didn't just send the 12 disciples out to continue his ministry back then. He is sending us out today!

During this time of significant unrest in our nation and around the world, I encourage you to take the gracious chalice of Christ's love, carried by sure and steady hands, and offer it to all those who are thirsting around you. I challenge you to discard anything that is preventing you from bringing healing refreshment to our thirsting world as you offer those around you a cup of cold water in all you think, say, and do. But don't just offer any old cup of water that has been standing around for awhile. Rather pour the freshest, purest, coldest water into a beautiful cup, add ice cubes, and lemon or lime slices. In other words, serve only your very best, by which I mean serve others only your very best self, knowing that, when you do so, you actually are not only serving others the living waters of Jesus but you also are actually serving Jesus. And in this we are promised there is great reward!

Let us pray: *Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true, and with thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you. Amen.*