

5th Sunday after Pentecost (L13A)
Matthew 10:40-42

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I preached at my mother's church two weeks ago, I did a little testifying about growing up in that congregation and learning to value the liturgy there. Here's what I said: "Good liturgy and weekly communion ensure that the gospel will be proclaimed even when a pastor is having a bad day and the sermon doesn't quite deliver the goods. And all of us pastors have our off days." I want you to hear that too, because it goes to the larger point of this sermon. This Gospel reading today is all about delivering the goods. I'll come back to that. First, though, I want to say that it's not just pastors who sometimes have bad days. Sometimes it's the folks who put together our worship resources. And this week they missed delivering the goods on the bulletin cover and in the introduction to the day – the "As We Gather" section on the inside of the bulletin cover. Let me read what it says there: "In today's gospel, Christ promises that the disciple who gives a cup of cold water to the little ones serves Christ himself." And the bulletin cover reflects that same idea. Here is a woman – presumably a disciple – giving a cup and a bowl of soup to a disheveled fellow. But there's something else going on here that some of you might catch, but I think it's pretty safe to say that not everyone will notice. Before I say what it is, I want to show you two icons, and I'm going to come down out of the pulpit to do that so you can actually see what I am talking about. I have two icons here. One is of Jesus, and the other is of St. Nicholas. What I want you to see is how their halos are different. St. Nicholas' halo is plain, and Jesus' halo has some lines and letters in it. In orthodox iconography, everybody but Jesus has plain halos, and only Jesus has those lines evoking his cross on them and those Greek letters. (These are Russian icons, with old Russian words everywhere else, but they have kept the letters on the halo Greek.) Those letters spell out God's name as delivered to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. I AM WHO I AM. Putting them on Jesus' halo is a way of saying that he is God. In other words what Jesus says in our Gospel reading: whoever receives me receives the One who sent me, who is of course God. Okay, now that you have seen that, it's time to look back at the bulletin cover. The disheveled man sitting there is wearing Jesus' halo. This is a depiction of what that introduction says: the disciple who gives a cup of cold water to a "little one" serves Christ himself. But here's where the bad day comes in for our worship resources folks: that is *not actually* what our Gospel reading says! If we don't read carefully, and don't attend to the context that these three verses are a part of, it is easy to conclude that Jesus's point is that we his followers, his disciples, should welcome prophets, righteous people, and "little ones," and that we'll get rewarded for doing that. But if we look at the context, and read carefully, we'll find that our reading is saying something altogether different.

In order to do that, we need to back up in this same chapter to the reading we had two weeks ago. You'll remember that there Jesus was talking to his disciples as he sent them out into the villages, to the "lost sheep of Israel." And he was sending them with a very specific task: to proclaim the gospel – the good news – that the kingdom of heaven has come near. That was the kernel of the task, to which was added healing the sick, raising the dead, curing skin diseases, and casting out demons, and those would be signs that the promise of the kingdom was indeed already coming to pass. Then last week he warned the disciples that this would not be an easy task, that it would not bring peace but conflict, and that they would be opposed in this mission, that it could even tear apart their families. But he also assured them that their mission was one that would bring life. Today's reading then follows immediately, so Jesus is still talking to the disciples. That means when he says, "whoever welcomes you, welcomes me" he is *not* talking about them welcoming others, he is talking about them *being welcomed* by others. And what follows just develops that

same point. The prophet, the righteous person, and “these little ones” are all categories of the disciples whom Jesus is sending out. They are not the ones receiving their mission.

I get that that is not entirely clear, because what in the world does it mean to “welcome a prophet in the name of a prophet?” or a “righteous person in the name of a righteous person”? That’s an expression that really doesn’t make sense in English, though it’s pretty much a word-for-word rendering of the Greek. What “in the name of a prophet” means is “*because* he or she is a prophet or a righteous person.” Now, a prophet is one who speaks for God, so this really means to welcome a prophet as one who speaks for God. It means to receive the message the prophet bears as God’s message to them, which is just continuing Jesus’ thought, “whoever welcomes you welcomes me.” Some of the disciples will be doing that kind of prophetic proclamation, the way Peter did a month ago in our Pentecost reading from the Book of Acts. But others will be there more in supporting roles. They will be “righteous persons,” living out the kind of righteousness Jesus talked about back in the Sermon on the Mount, showing mercy, making peace, not pushing their own agendas but having compassion for those they meet. Some will be clear leaders, and others will be more in the background, the “little ones” here who are welcomed as disciples.

Okay, but what about the rewards? What is a prophet’s or a righteous person’s reward, and how does it make sense that the one who welcomes them receives *their* reward? This might seem like a small detail, but it unlocks the real meaning here. What is the reward of a prophet? It’s when the message is heard, when it gets through. It’s when God’s bad news is heard and taken to heart, but even more it’s when eyes light up at God’s glorious good news that is more than could be hoped for, when faith takes hold and lives are transformed. And if that’s the reward of the prophet, how much more is it a reward for the one who is the recipient of their message? And so it is with a righteous person. You’ve heard the expression, “virtue is its own reward.” The reward of a righteous person is that right relationships are created or restored. That’s what peacemaking, mercy, and compassion are all about. And when right relationships happen, both sides benefit. Both get the “reward,” and even the smallest act of kindness – the cup of cold water – participates in this dynamic.

All of this is immediately and directly relevant to our lives as Christians and especially to the mission of the church that we share. The church is, as our bishop continually reminds us, communities of disciples engaged in the mission Jesus gave us: proclaiming in word and deed the good news of the kingdom of heaven, God’s coming reign that is nearer and nearer all the time. Last week’s message of the difficulties we face when we are faithful to that task is countered by this week’s message that it is *so worth it*. And it’s worth it not only or even primarily because *we* get something out of it, because *we* get a reward. It’s worth it because other people need the good news that we bear, that we center our common life around week in and week out here at Grace, the good news that empowers us and spills out into all the other things we do as a community of faith, most notably our food pantry, but also what we do as individuals on a daily basis. What it boils down to is this: we get to give people Jesus. And when by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that incomparable gift is welcomed and received, well that is a glorious thing, and all other rewards pale by comparison.

That bulletin cover is lovely, and conveys something that Jesus says in another passage. But it needs to be redrawn for what he is telling us today. That halo needs to go on the disciple there on the left and the man needs to be handing her the cup of water, and maybe even that bowl of soup. Because today Jesus needs us to appreciate the inestimable value of the treasure we bear as the church, so that we may delight in the mission we have been given and rejoice in its effects on others. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.