

The Ministry of a Cup of Cold Water

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Matthew 10:40-42

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It was the year the Space Shuttle made its first test flight off the back of a jetliner. It was an exciting time, and some of you were probably involved in that work. It was also the year Elvis died, at least some think so. At the movie theaters, we were watching *Rocky* and *Smokey and the Bandit*. The Eagles released the song *Hotel California*, now a classic, at least for my generation. And Jimmy Carter began his presidency. Anyone know the year?

1977, the year I graduated from high school and went on my first mission trip. It was to Chicago and one of its suburbs, Gary, Indiana. We visited the famed Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago and worked at a little mission in Gary called The Rock. We were there for a week and stayed in the homes of church members. I felt like my group had the best placement of all. We stayed with the most gracious and generous widow. I wish I remembered her name. I do remember her kind spirit. When we came in from our work each evening, she had a feast prepared for us. To compare it to our Deacon Family Ministry Supper would be a slight exaggeration, but only slight. She was a great cook and spared no expense in providing for her missionaries. I didn't know it at the time, but she was being faithful to the teaching of Jesus in our text from Matthew 10. She provided the ministry of a cup of cold water.

You do the same throughout the year when mission teams come here and stay in our Lighthouse. Long ago we named our gymnasium the Lighthouse because we wanted it to be just that, a lighthouse to the community shining the love of God in every direction. So we have mission groups from Vanderbilt University and other places stay in our Lighthouse. Our Women on Mission feed them. This may not be in the forefront of their minds at the time, but they too are being faithful to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 10. They provide the ministry of a cup of cold water.

When a death occurs in our church, our Koinonia Committee springs into action. They provide a meal for the family, sometimes for as many as 60 or 70 people. That mealtime becomes like a family reunion.

When Madison was here last week, a family in our church hosted her in their home. Instead of housing her in an impersonal hotel, she stayed with one of our families. She slept under their roof. She ate at their table. She got to know them.

Each of these is an example of the ministry of a cup of cold water, an act of hospitality done as unto Christ.

Matthew 10 is big. Something important is taking place in this chapter. This is the second of five sermons in the Gospel of Matthew, the first being the Sermon on the Mount. Someone has called this chapter Jesus' "rules for the road" (Ben Witherington, *Smyth and Helwys Commentary*, "Matthew," p. 215). Here he commissions the twelve apostles, sending them out to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He tells them to preach as they go, announcing, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

I find this part interesting. Jesus told them to take no gold, silver, or copper. In other words, don't take any money with you. He told them not even to take a change of clothes. They were to go from town to town announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, while staying in the homes of church members, depending upon their hospitality. He said that if anyone refused to receive them they were to "shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." Pretty strong!

Now, listen to this; it gets stronger. You remember Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament. God rained down fire and brimstone as judgment upon those two cities. Here is what Jesus said about those who refused to receive the apostles as they traveled,

Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

I didn't know it was *that* important to be hospitable to traveling missionaries. Did you?

The three verses I read earlier are the close of this commissioning sermon. In addition to the twelve apostles, Jesus identifies three other groups of "missionaries" that might be traveling and announcing the Kingdom of Heaven. They are "prophets," "righteous persons" and "little ones." Here's what he said,

Whoever welcomes a prophet...will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person...will receive the reward of the righteous; 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.

It was a big deal to Jesus to host these traveling missionaries. When a prophet came through your town, you were to welcome him or her into your home. When the righteous person came, he or she too should receive a warm welcome. Even the little ones, probably a reference to ordinary Christians—Vandy students, church members who are grieving, and others—they too were to be welcomed. The work of these traveling missionaries was important to Jesus, and the work of hosting them was important too. In fact, Jesus said that the host, the one who opens her home and cooks, would receive a reward equal to the missionary.

So this text really got me to thinking this week. Why was this so important to Jesus? The host received a reward equal to the prophet, equal to the righteous person, equal to the missionaries? Why was this such a big deal? Here's what I think. The work of Jesus would be multifaceted. Some would be able to travel announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven was near. But not everyone would be able to do that. Maybe they could host the ones who could travel. Both functions were necessary and therefore important to effectiveness.

What we see in this text is the organization of the apostles for a sustained effort over a long period. The work of Jesus would not be a splash in the pan. No, infrastructure was being created, cooperation, so this work would grow and be sustained. It meant that every part of the work was important. The prophets and missionaries were important, yes, but they might be tempted to pride. They might begin to think that their work was more important than that of others and that they therefore deserved a greater reward. Not so, Jesus said. The widow who opened her home would receive a reward equal to the prophets and missionaries. It was about everyone doing whatever he or she could do.

So the question this text presents to us is this: what is the cup of cold water you have to offer? What is your part, your niche, in this global endeavor of announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near?

Some of you are taking the lead in providing affordable housing. You have the expertise and experience. Give your best to it. Others of you might say, “No, no, I can’t do that. That’s not where my expertise and experience are. But, you know, I can sew. I can make masks. I can help there.” Give your best. Or maybe it’s feeding people. Or visiting people who are sick. Or building bridges to other communities of faith or to the African American community. Or helping us with the technical side of livestreaming worship and virtual Vacation Bible School. You know I could go on and on. The list of cups of cold water is endless. Here’s the message: find what you do and do it to the best of your ability. Do it as unto Christ.

Years ago this book changed my understanding of the church. It was written by one of Southern Baptist’s prophets, Dr. Findley Edge. It is titled *The Greening of the Church*. He says that the church began as a people on mission for God. Jesus commissioned the apostles to go out and announce the kingdom. The prophets went. The righteous went. The little ones went. Others hosted. Everyone was offering a cup of cold water of some sort. The call of God, Dr. Edge said, was not to join something or accept something. It was a call to be on mission. Over time, though, the church shifted its focus from a people on mission to a people who belonged to an institution. The institution grew stronger and stronger and eventually took on a life of its own. And at some points in history, you had to look pretty hard to find evidence of the mission within the institution.

Dr. Edge, who is deceased now, used to say that we need to change the way we measure the effectiveness of churches. Most tend to evaluate the effectiveness based on how many attend on Sunday. That’s wrong, he said. Here’s what we really need to ask, “What did those who attended on Sunday do during the week?” (p. 47)

Cups of cold water in your hands and mine. What will we do with them? Some will travel announcing the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of us will not. So what will we do? What will you do with the cup of cold water in your hand? Find what you do and do it to the best of your ability. Do it as unto Christ himself.

Closing Prayer

Lord, quicken your mission within each of us. May we not be satisfied until we belong to a movement, your mission. Amen.