

## **“A CUP OF COLD WATER”**

*Matthew 10:40-42*

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Some of you know that I have been asked to teach a spiritual growth study for the East Ohio Conference School of Christian Mission in July and September. In preparation for teaching that study, I recently attended the Midwest Regional School that was held at Manchester College in North Manchester, Indiana. Where is North Manchester, you may ask? I didn't know either, but soon found out that it is about forty miles west of Fort Wayne, deep in the Midwest farm country. It was a warm summer day, and I had been driving for over five hours when I arrived. I had a map of the campus, but wasn't quite sure where I was going. Finally I arrived at the dorm where I was to stay. I stopped in the unloading area and was opening my car door when a young man about ten or eleven came running up to me. He had a lanyard around his neck with a name tag that said, "Hospitality Committee." With a huge smile on his face he exclaimed, "Welcome to Manchester College. Do you need me to carry anything?" Well, all I had was my briefcase and one suitcase which I could easily manage, but he seemed so eager to help that I said, "Yes, you can help me with my suitcase." First he opened the door, then he took me to the registration desk. He waited patiently while I registered and got my key, then showed me which direction to head down the corridor to my room. When we got to the room, he took my suitcase in the door and set it down. I asked him his name and where he was from. He told me he was from the local United Methodist Church and a member of the youth group there. I thanked him, and he went running back down the hall to assist the next guest.

I never saw him again after that afternoon, but that young man set a tone for my entire visit to Manchester College and the Regional School of Christian Mission. After such a cheerful welcome, how could I have anything but a positive experience? In fact, it was the first thing I told my wife when I called her to let her know I had arrived safely.

Contrast this experience, if you will, with a visit that my wife and I made to a local church recently while we were on vacation. No, I won't tell you the name of the church because we're on the radio, but I will tell you that it was not a church in Ohio. Again, not sure where we were going, we found our way to the sanctuary for what was billed as the "contemporary service." We were expecting an inspiring and vibrant experience, after all this was a county seat town, and the sanctuary was large and well-maintained. Sadly, there were only seven people in the congregation, including us. Even more surprising and alarming was the fact that not one person spoke to us, let alone welcomed us to worship that morning. While the worship leader seemed sincere, and we felt the presence of God in that small community, the obvious lack of hospitality overshadowed the music and the message of the spoken word.

United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase has recently written a book that is capturing the imagination of pastors and congregations across the country. It is called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. It will not surprise you to learn that the first practice that Schnase isolates, after visits to dozens of congregations, is radical hospitality. Radical? Is it radical these days to make eye contact, smile and say “good morning”?

Church growth experts tell us that in the first ten minutes of a visit, new people decide whether or not they will come back to this church. That’s before they’ve heard the special music or the sermon. What happens in the parking lot, how they are treated by the greeters and the ushers at the door, the demeanor of the other people that they meet as they find their way to worship — sets the tone for their whole experience. Sometimes a person will say, “Oh, I’m just an usher. I’m only a greeter.” Your actions are pivotal in the welcoming role of the church! Your actions help determine who stays and who keeps on looking for a church that speaks to their needs.

Hospitality is so basic; hospitality is so simple, that anyone can do it. The example Jesus lifts up is the cup of cold water. Giving someone a cup of cold water is something that all of us can do. It costs nothing except the time and the energy to notice that someone is thirsty, and to go to the faucet and turn on the tap. In this tenth chapter of Matthew Jesus has been explaining what it means to be a disciple. Two weeks ago we talked about the call to discipleship and the job description of a follower of Jesus. We are to do as Jesus did: teach, preach and heal. Last week we were reminded that the lifestyle of a disciple is a risky one. Some have been martyred because of their faith. All of us have costly and challenging decisions to face when we take discipleship seriously.

Now today Jesus emphasizes this business about **hospitality**. Hospitality is not just something for those who have a special aptitude for that kind of thing, or a task for those with that particular spiritual gift. Hospitality is an expectation for every follower of Jesus. It is part of the instruction manual on discipleship. Hospitality is simply part of the job description of the Christian life.

One morning a man found a terrified, stray dog in his driveway. He could see that the dog was thirsty, so he brought a bucket of water. As the man backed away, the unfamiliar dog came forward and slurped the water. He was reminded of the Bible verse from Matthew, “*Whoever gives even a cup of cold water....*”

Then he reflected, “From there I turned to what’s called the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, also in Matthew. In that parable, Jesus divides the people into two groups. The “sheep” have nursed the sick, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and visited those in prison. The “goats” have not. The parable offers no support for those who restrict faith to spiritual matters. It deals with practical matters, as practical as giving a drink of water to the thirsty. Basically, it tells us to treat others with kindness. Not just important people, but also the unimportant, the overlooked, the undervalued, the unemployed.” (1)

After our experience in that inhospitable church, I began to reflect upon our own atmosphere at Church of the Saviour. Of course, people are friendly and hospitable to me! I’m the senior pastor! My robe and stole kind of gives me away. But what about new people? What about thirsty people? We have parking lot greeters, helpful ushers and most of us are quick to reach out a hand a greet others. But we cannot take hospitality for granted!

Last Sunday evening I received an e-mail that said in part, “Dear Dr. Yoost, It was a pleasure to worship with you this morning. My daughters said that your church was the

friendliest church that they have visited in a long time.” Music to my ears! I hope everyone who visits our church feels that way.

A few years ago my good friend Dr. Al Herzog helped us to do an accessibility audit of our building. What are the barriers that keep people from coming to church here? Well, we have an old, intimidating-looking building. There are a lot of steps at the front of the church, and the doors are eight inches thick. But wait a minute! We have a beautiful carport entrance with a button that opens the door automatically, an elevator at both ends of the building, and handicapped parking places close to the entrances. We have room for wheelchairs and walkers, and we have baby changing facilities in most all of our bathrooms, men’s and women’s alike. We have pagers in the nursery so that parents can be called if your children are in distress. We offer gluten-free waters at Communion, and we have eliminated products containing nuts from the food we serve so that those with allergies will be able to participate. Yet I am continually haunted by the thought that our attitudes and actions may exclude some of the people who are seeking help and hope for their lives.

Social scientists observe that most of us like to be with people like us — we gravitate toward those with whom we have much in common. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with that, except that subtly, when we associate only with people like us we exclude others in thoughtless and sometimes cruel ways. I know some people who were part of a card club. When the husband died, the wife was excluded, because this was a couple’s club, and everybody knows you have to have partners to play cards. I know families who exclude their divorced relatives from family gatherings. With the awkwardness of the in-laws and the children and all, they just don’t fit in. You do understand. I know churches where some people are not made to feel part of the congregation. In some churches, unless you were born in that community, you are always seen as an outsider. When I was a District Superintendent, I went to a church to do some conflict management, which translated means I was attempting to referee a church fight. In order to get people talking with one another and to think about what the church meant to them, I asked people to share when they became part of the congregation. One woman told me after the meeting, “I have been a member for nineteen years, but I still don’t feel part of this church. We moved here from out of town, you see.”

I shall never forget a story that Tony Campolo told when he came to preach at one of the Vision 2000 events I led a few years ago. He said that when he was in high school, it was discovered that one of the boys in his class was homosexual. He said one day in the locker room, the other boys decided to beat this boy up, urinate on him and completely humiliate him. Later that week, the young man committed suicide. By our actions, by our attitudes, whom do we exclude? Is it that difficult simply to offer a cup of cold water?

It was and is the rule of St. Benedict who founded the Benedictine Order which has as its foundation to “welcome each person as if he or she were Christ.”(2) The Bible tells us that when we welcome others, we are welcoming Christ. Our example is Jesus, himself, who welcomes all persons and who turns no one away. I have never seen a picture of Christ with his arms folded or with his back turned on anyone. I have seen countless pictures of Christ with outstretched arms, drawing all persons to himself.

The slogan of the United Methodist Church, adopted a few years ago is: “*Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors, We are the people of the United Methodist Church.*” I would say that while we are trying to be a welcoming church and we are working to make hospitality a part of our lifestyle, we still have a long way to go. There are still people for whom “welcome” is only

a word and not a reality. We are called to take the cup of cold water that was offered to us, and in turn, offer it to others. We are called to welcome each person as if he or she were the Christ. The truth is, when we welcome others we are welcoming Christ, and when we exclude others we are turning our backs on the Christ who embraces all people with his compassion and his love.

Hospitality is not the job of the Evangelism Council or the greeters or the ushers or the pastors. It is part of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Today, this week, throughout our lives, let us make it a priority to offer **a cup of cold water** to all who thirst for God.

*Prayer:* Dear God, we thank you for your love that reaches out to all people. Help us to reach out to others in your name. Amen.

Notes:

1. *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 83. No. 7., p. 125.
2. *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*. Pentecost 1 2008, Year A., p. 31.