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Matthew 10:40-42

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Catholic writer Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as the creation of a space in our lives where a stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. I like that. I think it's important. We live in a great big, scary world. We're more on-guard all the time. We're more polarized all the time. It's easy for us to want to hunker down, especially with like-minded folks, and hang on for dear life. It's easy to want to characterize other people, even people we know well, as strangers, threats, enemies.

So what do you think, is it possible for us to create space in our lives for these strangers? Jesus seems to think so. In our gospel for today, he announces that the church is in the welcoming business. Sometimes we're the ones doing the welcoming. And at other times, somebody else is welcoming us. Either way, this becomes an opportunity to enlarge our view of the world and maybe enlarge our view of God.

But right on the heels of it comes all this talk of rewards. 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 receives a righteous persons reward.

We all like to be rewarded for our efforts. Gold stars on our school papers as children. Praise from parents and teachers as we get older. Money as payment for our expenditure of our time and talents in our work. Perhaps being recognized publically with a plaque or round of applause for our community service. We all appreciate recognition and benefits from our actions.

Jesus is promising a reward for those who welcome prophets and righteous persons to the community, and for those who offer small kindnesses to the vulnerable in their midst.

I've been in Bible Studies with people when we have wondered what that reward is. We have wondered together, "Surely it can't be eternal life?" If the reward is eternal life, then what about our belief that we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not according to our own works? What is this reward that Jesus is talking about?

Here are some famous quotes about rewards that intrigued me:

"The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more."—Jonas Salk
(American medical researcher and virologist who discovered and developed the first successful inactivated polio vaccine, 1914-1995)

"The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it."—John Ruskin (British art critic, artist, social thinker, and philanthropist, 1819-1900)

"There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward."—Khalil Gibran
(Lebanese artist, poet, and writer, 1883-1931)

"To live for results would be to sentence myself to continuous frustration. My only sure reward is in my actions and not from them."—Hugh Prather (Writer, minister, and counselor, most famous for his first book, *Notes to Myself*, first published in 1970, 1939-2010)

"An act of goodness is of itself an act of happiness. No reward coming after the event can compare with the sweet reward that went with it."—Maurice Maeterlinck (Belgian playwright, poet, and essayist, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911, 1862-1949)

Reading these quotes, I get the feeling that these people are not doing good things for others for the purpose of feeling good about what they've done or about

themselves. They are talking about giving one's life away for some purpose beyond ourselves that, paradoxically, results in a gain. As Christians we would call that the reward of the righteous.

And then this one line jumped out at me, the last line of this brief passage: “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.”

What a little thing, don't you think, to give a cup of cold water? Jesus emphasizes the same by his use of the word “even.” We often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or entailing great feats, and sometimes that is exactly what discipleship comes to. But at other times, Jesus seems to say, it's nothing more than giving a cup of cold water to one in need. Or 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 volunteering at the local foodbank. Or making a donation to an agency like Luther World Relief or Kiva. Or...you get the idea.

Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but tend the relationships that are most important to us, so also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture. Anything done

in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.

You probably know as well as I do Loren Eiseley's story of "the star thrower" -- the one about the guy tossing starfish after starfish into the sea. When asked why, he replies that if they don't get back in the water soon, they'll dry out and die.

Looking at a beach strewn with thousands of starfish, his interlocutor responds that he can't possibly hope to make any difference. To which he says -- and this is famous closing line -- "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world."

Exactly. Because Jesus has promised to come in time to redeem all in love, to fix all damage, heal all hurts, and wipe the tears from every eye, we can in the meantime devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large, not trying to save the world -- Jesus has promised to do that! -- but simply trying to care for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed. And so even a cup of cold 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.

Can you imagine that, friends? That 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? If you can, then tell your people that they are already doing this. They are already, that is, in countless and myriad ways making this world God loves so much a little better, a little more trustworthy, a little more joyful through their gestures of love, mercy, and compassion. There is no small gesture, brother and sisters, and through your cups of cold water, hugs, helping hands, and listening ears you are caring for the world God loves so much.

Thank you to everyone who helped out with Vacation Bible School this week, who prepared food, soothed tears of children and helped comfort them. Thank you to everyone who helps serve coffee every week, or communion, or helps usher.

Thank you to all of you who help neighbors with trees that have come down after a storm, or take the time to say hello to children in your neighborhood or who make your workplace a more welcoming place with your acts of love and mercy.

According to Jesus there are no small gestures. Every act of mercy and compassion is rewarded in the doing of it.