

**5 Pentecost
July 2, 2023**

Sermon by Deacon Steve Seibert

A cup of cold water...

In the Holy Land, to this day, water is a precious commodity. When Leila and I visited Israel earlier this year, that became obvious as we traveled through the land. Arid. Israel prides itself on developing agricultural techniques that cut water consumption by 30%. We saw acres of banana trees covered with a protective mesh that reduces evaporation.

Episcopal priest and archaeologist Heidi Kinner has been active in archaeological digs in Israel for several years. She believes that when we study and learn about the places Jesus lived and traveled, we gain a deeper understanding of what his words mean. For example, she said, when we begin to pray the twenty-third psalm **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want**, we may picture the Lord shepherding us in verdant hills with the shade of trees. When we shift our mental image to the land in Palestine, with its rocky and scrubby terrain **He leadeth me beside the still waters** becomes a much more powerful image. Jesus is with us in the barren places of our lives, times and places of desolation, feeling lost or hopeless. In those very places, he will lead us to the springs of life, the life-giving water that that flows from him.

On a much more mundane level, Mother Heidi acknowledges the scarcity of water in the Middle East. One way she honors those who live there now is by minimalizing her use of water. She told a group of us from this diocese that should we accompany her on an archaeological dig, we could expect her to smell less than pleasant, as she bathes only every three to four days when she is there!

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. Jesus is talking hospitality, the practice of welcoming, sheltering and feeding; but it feels as though he is talking about something more. He is talking about people acknowledging the validity, the calling, the work of the disciples. And...being willing to give something as precious as water to support the work of the disciples. What might you identify in your life that is both precious and scarce that you would be willing to share in this regard?

When I have read this passage previously, I always interpreted "little ones" as children. However, the note in my bible says that "little ones" are the disciples. Let us be clear on that point. This verse is the last in Jesus' instructions for the disciples. He has just spoken about the cost of discipleship: son against father; anyone who does not take up their cross is not worthy;

being scourged in synagogues, being universally hated in Jesus' name; finding our lives only by giving them up for the sake of Jesus. These jarring words are followed by today's passage. It seems as though Jesus is reassuring the disciples in these verses. The tasks he is giving them come with mountains of challenges. Yet, he intentionally places the disciples in the company of prophets and the righteous. Prophets are held in high esteem; they are told, **Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.** The righteous will **shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father**, that is, the kingdom of God.

In Paul's epistle, he speaks of righteousness. **When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness...But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Paul seems to be echoing some of what Jesus has said to the disciples. A couple of points of clarification. In the Greek translation of this passage, the word *advantage is fruit*. I feel fruit has a better sense, it's less transactional. Less of "So what do I get out of this, God?" The fruit of our being subject to God is eternal life. The word "charisma" is translated as "free gift" but the actual translation is simply gift. The use of the word free is both redundant and a bit confusing. If the gift comes with strings attached, it is, no longer a gift. It may be a payment, it may be given to coerce someone to do something, but it is no longer a gift. So, understand this: the gift of eternal life given by God to us is given in love with no strings attached, no pre-conditions. Oh, one more thing, it is not for us to decide who gets this gift and who does not.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

These words of Jesus are full of power and reassurance. They are spoken to the twelve but as with many of Jesus' words, they are spoken to us. Jesus has already told the apostles – and us – that when we go out in his name and his love, we may not always be given the warmest reception. But when we are welcomed, the divine connection to him and the Father is made with those who are welcoming us. These words feel like they are a commission. To me, it is clear that Jesus is telling us that we are his ambassadors, a way for others in the world to connect to and with him.

What does that look like to us gathered here this morning at St. Cyprian's, both here at 37 Lovett Street and those watching online? I believe it simply means that we can operate as though Jesus is behind us, beside us – within us. And I know you all well enough to say this: **You will not turn this into arrogance.** Nope, the Body of Christ gathered at St. Cyprian's seeks to act with humility and love. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, seeking to serve our sisters and

brothers both within the body of Christ and those who may not consider themselves followers of Jesus.

I've given you my perspective on today's gospel passage. Here is an interpretation by Dr. Colin Yuckman, Duke Divinity School. He says,

Here is a passage for the anonymous disciple, the one who does hard work but is hardly ever recognized.

He reviews the gospel passages that come before this in a similar fashion as I have done. Then he asks how receiving an apostle entitles one to the reward of the apostle – because that is what Jesus is saying. Giving a cup of cold water to a disciple? **None of these will lose their reward.**

I quote, *'The rawness of Jesus words here should not be lost on us—simply a cup of water in the name of a disciple and one's reward is granted forever. The reward is not simply for the preachers and the prophets among us but for those whose calling is simply to pour the drinks and play the host. **The divine mission is as much about the unnamed people who provide a thirsty servant a drink of cold water as the familiar names that dot the pages of church histories.***

There are many people in the Book of Acts who receive the barest mentioning of their name. Their contributions are far greater than the air time they are given. Their hospitality was vital to the spread of the Church.

Again, I quote, *It may be an unconscious prejudice of clergy dependent traditions such as our Episcopal Church that we tend to discount the roles of such people as less missional. Those who hospitably receive the Lord's emissaries may be just as influential if not more so in the spreading of God's kingdom.*

Allow me to add a few words to Yuckman's.

Those **of us** who hospitably receive the Lord's emissaries may be just as influential in the spreading of God's kingdom. "None of you," Jesus tells us, "will lose your reward.

Amen.