

Sermon on Matthew 10:40-42
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 2, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So this is our third Sunday in a row hearing the gospel of Matthew, chapter 10, about how Jesus sent out his disciples to go out into the surrounding towns and villages, “*giving them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and sickness.*” He sent them to proclaim the good news of the coming Kingdom of God, to just travel light – without a lot of baggage – but if people did not receive them, to leave and shake the dust from their feet. He was sending them out like sheep among wolves, and told them to be wise like serpents but innocent as doves. So they should not be surprised at persecutions, suffering and time spent in jail by hostile authorities because of their message. Their words of witness would cause division, even within families, for Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword – the sword of truth that would cut through the denial and neglect of God’s Word. So we have been challenged by Jesus’ words these weeks as we address the truth about racism in our community and the Church as an institution, and the fear that so many people live with because of racial violence, gun violence, domestic assault, and the deportation of immigrants.

These past two weeks we have heard these words within our own context of increasing tension and stress over politics and the racial divide in our country. We have been living in the tension over the jury decision to acquit Officer Yanez for the killing of Philando Castille in a traffic stop, the proposed American Health Care Act by the Senate could drop the health coverage of 22 million Americans if it is passed in its present form, our Minnesota legislature and governor are locked in a standoff, and nobody is happy. Unless they are out on a lake, fishing, swimming or playing with kids on this holiday weekend!

The past two Sundays have brought a tall order of challenge from the gospel against the “way things are” in our nation and world, the Church, and in our daily lives. But today Jesus takes us a step back, to look at the trees in this overwhelming forest of our existence, and consider what gives us hope – to “smell the roses” (if I may mix a metaphor). Today’s gospel is a refreshing word of hope, which lifts up the witness of small acts of service when we are willing to receive those who come in Jesus’ name. Listen to them again:

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me [who is: God!]. 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 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.”

So there you have it. A welcome respite for us “little ones” who seek to be faithful and serve, living in the shadow of the witness of great ones like the apostles and all the saints, Saint Francis, Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and scores of others to whom we could never think to measure up. Do you mean, Jesus, that when I do something so simple as even giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty person, or serve a meal at Loaves and Fishes to a homeless neighbor, or make a donation to a local food shelf ministry, that my witness is in line with the witness of the apostles, preachers and missionaries who have been renowned for ages? The simple answer is: yes. No act of faith, no matter how small or large, done in Jesus’ name, is diminished. Every act of love in Jesus’ name has its own power!

So, yes. We have a powerful and urgent calling to address the challenging issues of our day: racism, violence, hate, sexism, and other obstacles to the kingdom which God is establishing among us. It can seem overwhelming and exhausting. But the good news of Jesus today is that every act of love counts: the cup of cold water given to a thirsty guest, a meal served to a hungry person, a piece of clothing given to someone in need, a kind word to a lonely soul, a smile to the one depressed. Each one of these small acts of love counts. “Even” the one that we do, which seems to us so small and insignificant.

I was overwhelmed myself this past Thursday evening at our weekly YouthWorks Dinner, held in our Redeemer church undercroft. We have set up the schedule so that every Thursday our own congregation members and community are invited to share a meal with the youth and adult staff, who have come from different churches and communities in the Midwest here to St. Paul. We have been the hosts, but on Thursday evenings the youth cook and serve us! We enjoy a meal of pasta and salad, and whatever dessert treats we might bring – brownies, bars, or a few cookies or cupcakes. Then the youth clean up the kitchen while we start a fire out in the courtyard, or sit around tables and chat with their adult chaperones. This past week we heard how thankful and impressed the adults were with our facilities – we had so much room for over 50 youth (who don’t mind sleeping on the floor on air mattresses!). Last Thursday Clifford, Christine and Hilary taught crafts to the youth here in the Learning Center – God’s Eyes and Origami paper folding. When the fire was ready, the youth came out to make s’mores (with roasted marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers, and enjoy some “down time” with each other around a campfire. Here in the center of the city! Who would have thought it possible!

After the s’mores were eaten, we gathered everyone together to sing a few campfire songs like you do at camp or Bible School. I welcomed everyone, and

asked the kids to share what they had done that week, what work they had done, what fun they had had, how they had slept, how they liked St. Paul. You know the drill. I was struck with how the simple things had such an effect on them! They loved most serving food to people, playing with kids, getting to know each other from other churches, being in the city where they had never been. They named all those simple things as highlights of their week – of their life! I'm not kidding!

Then one of the adult leaders from one of the churches asked the small group of us from Redeemer (about 10 of us) and YouthWorks staff to gather in a small circle. The youth and adults then all surrounded us, and laid hands on us. He said a prayer thanking God for giving them this time, in this beautiful place. He thanked God for this little church and the great ministry we do here, for the outreach and the many diverse people who come in our doors, for the pastor and its people, our witness to the gospel, and the effect this has had on all the young people who have lived here this past week. It was a wonderful affirmation. The kids did all the work. All we did was offer our space, get out of their way, and come out on a Thursday night to eat and sing songs. A cup of cold water.

Afterwards, I was alone in the hallway outside my office, putting away my guitar. A female counselor approached and said, "Pastor, I have been bringing youth groups to YouthWorks church sites for ten years, and never have I seen church members come out to meet the youth groups staying at their church. Thank you for your church's warm hospitality and for meeting us." I was overwhelmed.

Which proves to me the power of the little things, the small witnesses of faith that you, and many unknown, unsung people do, out of love, in the name of Jesus. Some of you go to the State Legislature and meet with representatives, senators and governors – you do great things as witnesses to justice. Some of you do other public ministry – you teach children or adults in schools, colleges and universities, some of you write legislation or practice law or judge cases, some of you serve as physicians, nurses, counselors and caregivers. Some of you act as caring parents, neighbors, grandparents, uncles and aunts, block club parents, girl scout leaders and coaches for youth sports. And then in the church, some of you are leaders, and others do the simple things that make the church work: you set the tables, you usher and greet worshipers, you bring cookies and treats or make the coffee for coffee hour, you stay overnight as hosts for Project Home, you chaperone youth or children on field trips, you sing in a choir, read lessons in worship, you wash the dishes after Eucharist. So many simple things, so simple that you think nobody notices – and maybe people don't. But God does. Like that church youth leader, who prayed for us on Thursday evening. God knows everything we do which gives comfort and hope to our neighbor. This is how you and I serve, and bear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus. Sometimes we use words. But usually with a cup of cold water. In Jesus' name.