

Sermon
Matthew 10:40-42
4 Pentecost-A • June 28, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

Three little verses. In them, our text contains three sayings of Jesus. Each is connected with the others by a common word. The first two sayings are connected by the word *welcome*. The second saying is connected to the third by the word *reward*.

We all know that to welcome a person means to show that person hospitality. Showing hospitality to a stranger means taking him or her under our care for a given time. This was especially important in the first century, where travelers depended on the kindness of others for their very survival. The desert outside the villages was harsh and unforgiving. And being alone or separated from your own community were about the worst things that could happen to anyone. Hospitality often meant the difference between life and death.

In the first century, there wasn't really a sense of the *individual*, because a person was always considered part of a community or group. So, even if an individual welcomed another individual, that action symbolized one group welcoming another group.

In a way, it is still this way today. When we minister to others, we don't just represent ourselves, but the congregation we belong to, the denomination we are a part of, and the God we serve.

So today, in the verses of our gospel lesson, Jesus talks of welcoming... as in a prophet welcoming another prophet. Still, his sayings are a bit cryptic.

We know from Paul's writings to the church in Corinth that there were prophets in the early church. It was a special gift given to some people. Earlier in Matthew's gospel he may have indicated that there were such prophets as well as false-prophets in his newly formed Christian community.

But who are the *righteous*? The *little ones*?

The little ones probably does not only mean children, but the phrase also was Matthew's term for us *ordinary* folk. It is likely that *little ones* also referred to new Christian converts – as *little ones* in the faith -- new disciples – perhaps in contrast to the *righteous ones* -- those mature in the faith. While the mature believers, or the *righteous*, might be able to withstand persecution, causing a *little one* to stumble brought great punishment; but showing compassion to a *little one* brought reward.

How would the way we minister to each other be any different if we understood that we are Christ's presence in the world? What if we understand the term "Christian" as "little Christ"? What if the way we treat other believers is the way we are treating Christ?

So Jesus' words here could be a call for us to reexamine our faith and how it is that we live out that faith daily. Jesus is asking his disciples to live out their baptismal calling. Could it be that the call is extended to us?

I think the answer is a resounding, yes.

But what does this mean for us today?

If we are being called to be one of Jesus' disciples, what are we supposed to do?

My guess is that Jesus wants us to get outside ourselves and help others.

To minister to those in need.

Does becoming a disciple of Jesus mean leaving our families?

For most of us, no. But for me, it did.

We don't have to go far to find people to help.

There are lots of things we can do here at home.

And there are lots of things we are already doing.

- Things like providing a place here for student intern pastors to learn how to lead a congregation is an important service to them and to our larger Church.
- Things like empowering our youth by sending them to the national youth gathering or providing a safe place for the younger ones in our community to learn about Jesus in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.
- Things like supporting the Deveraux Center, the community mission here in Coos Bay that is a day center for those who are mentally ill and/or homeless by offering showers, laundry, hot meals and housing case management.
- Things like hosting meals for seniors via Senior Café and WELCA and Thanksgiving. And when COVID-19 made those things not possible, funds were directed into food cards for seniors and the needy. Not only has some of the Coquille Tribe grant money been funneled into gift cards, but Gloria Dei has also received more than \$2500 that has been designated specifically to purchase gift cards for those who need help.
- Things like members, Lynn Danner and Doris Smith, faithfully sewing hundreds of masks to be given to this community, to medical personnel and to others.

- Things like announcing to the community that the congregation of Gloria Dei is a welcoming place, specifically to those such as the LGBTQIA+ community, some of whom have been hurt by the church of their youth and assume that "All are Welcome" means everyone BUT me.
- And things like showing up for and listening to our siblings of color.

Are there other ways we can help? Other things we can do?

One of the great things about being a church is that there is strength in numbers and there are usually an abundance of great ideas. And maybe recognizing our privilege and paring down our lifestyle might be a couple of places to start. But even if we can't do these things, we can do something. We can practice discipleship.

Several summers ago, just before I was to report for my year of internship at United Lutheran Church in Eugene, Oregon, Tom Dodd, the pastor told me that the church council and some of the members were reading a book called *PoWeR SuRGe*. The book by Michael Foss detailed six marks of discipleship that people could incorporate into their lives to reinvigorate their faith *and* their church.

Power Surge is just a phrase to help us remember the six marks of discipleship – the things that we are to do as followers of Jesus....

Pray daily, **W**orship weekly, **R**ead the Bible, **S**erve others inside and outside the church, be in **R**elationship with others to encourage spiritual growth, and **G**ive of our own time and talents.

During my second year at seminary, I was lucky enough to secure a part-time job as the church secretary for Resurrection, one of our Lutheran Churches in Oakland, served by the amazing Pastor Lucy Kolin. One day as I stood in the crowded post office waiting to buy a roll of stamps for the church office, the woman in line in front of me, a young Black woman with a small child, struck up a conversation with me.

We exchanged pleasantries and then she asked me,

"Do you know Jesus?" Her question caught me by surprise.

After all, **I** was the one in seminary, **I** worked at a church and **I** was preparing to go on internship the next year. Wasn't talking about Jesus **MY** job?

Yeah, as a baptized Christian, it's my **JOB**. Here was this woman, this stranger, actually *doing* what we are all commanded to do -asking me the question that seems so simple. Yet we know that asking it involves great risk. She could have been drawn into an argument, embarrassed, or worse, been insulted and ridiculed.

I think **that's** our fear, and why most of us never ask the question. Why I didn't talk to the woman in the post office first? We may be afraid that our motives will be suspect and the person with whom we hope to share will embarrass us.

The fact is, most of us weren't raised by people who modeled or promoted this evangelistic behavior. I know I wasn't. We don't know how to do it and it doesn't come naturally. My parents were of northern European descent and were raised in the depression. They were taught to be self-sufficient and never to share their thoughts or feelings about religion or politics in polite company. And my parents taught and modeled to their children what they had been taught.

Folks, we have to break the cycle!

Asking "the question" seemed so natural to the woman in the post office that she must have grown up in a culture that honored sharing, since she seemed much more free to do it. Why can't we?

But where do we find the courage?

I think we find it by remembering that is God with whom we put our trust, not in ourselves or in someone else.

God is the faithful creator who cares for each creature – even sparrows.

Another thing is that you don't have to approach people alone – remember, Jesus sent out the disciples into the harvest two by two...

take a friend, a spouse, a child, or a parent with you when you visit with others.

But if you still can't find anyone or no one is available, there is always God.

We trust that God – in the form of the Holy Spirit, will always be with us.

In the discipleship business, talking with your friends about God and inviting them to church or sharing our Zoom link, praying for others, and working toward justice for all, counts as discipleship. In fact, some would say that these are some of the most important things we can do.

Sharing God's love with others and inviting them to experience that same love is the purest form of discipleship.

So yeah, in these three short verses, Jesus gives us a tough assignment.

But the Good News is that our instructor is incredibly forgiving and along the way I am convinced that we will be graced with some extraordinarily divine help.

Amen.