

Our Reception Problem

^{NRS} Mat 10:40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.⁴¹ 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;⁴² 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."

If you had to summarize your beliefs into one sentence, boil everything you believe down into one pure, crystalline sentence: what would you say?

I no longer remember where I heard her say it- whether it was at church or over dinner or somewhere else entirely. But I distinctly remember Cherrie Langford, a dear family friend, answering someone who asked her this question. They said, if she had to sum her faith up into one sentence what would she say? She quoted this passage, or a version of this passage, saying: "Giving a cup of cold water to such as these. That's what I believe in."

What she meant, I think, was that faith for her isn't about complex theology or exegetical gymnastics with the scripture. It's about small, simple, every day acts of kindness- with nothing random about them. What does Cherrie believe? That giving someone a cold cup of water beats a sermon about giving a cold cup of water any day.

And ever since then, every time I read this text, the cold cup of water text, this is how I hear it- basically summing the Gospel up as be good by doing good.

And you know, I think there's a lot to this. Jesus was certainly more fond of stories than systematic theology, more at home with parables than Biblical hermeneutics.

But as much as there is to this, the more time I spent with this text this week, the less I think this message of simple acts is actually what Jesus is talking about when he refers to this cold cup of water. And it isn't just because I'm fond of sermons.

First off, there's the context. Who is Jesus talking to, and what is he talking about? Jesus is giving a big 'Get out there and win one for the ol' Gipper' speech to the disciples. Either the disciples have started getting on his nerves hanging around him all the time, or he's finally figuring out 13 can get more done than 1, and he's sending the 12 out. But before they go, he fills them up with a whole lot of advice.

I actually imagine Jesus a little mom like here. Straightening the disciples' tunics and fussing over their hair. Telling them things like, "And remember, if people don't listen to you, it's not your fault. You just shake the dust off your feet and go talk to someone else." "And don't take a bag with you either- or any money. People will provide for you." It's all the little last minute things you do and say when you're getting someone ready for some big new adventure.

And it reminds me of the time I went to hear one of my very best friends preach in New Jersey. Doug and I were in our last year. He and I met as chaplains at the hospital. The very first day when our supervisors were terrifying us with how hard the work would be, Doug stuck his hand up and said: "Yeah...I don't really like people. Is that going to be a problem?" He was mostly kidding, and at that moment I knew I was going to love Doug. Well, Doug was going to preach at a church he had worked with before and that was thinking about hiring him. So he was pretty nervous, and I was just going along to kind of cheer him on. And he did absolutely great. But when we were hanging out in the

Narthex, I noticed his robe and stole was a little askew. And I ran over to him and I was fixing his stole and adjusting his collar and his tie, when I felt everyone kind of looking at us kind of funny, and I realized I was pretty much doing exactly what Melis did to me in a situation like that. I tried to salvage the situation and manfully pat Doug on the arm, but I'm afraid the damage was done. Doug didn't get the job, but he told me it didn't matter, because thanks to me he did look absolutely fabulous.

So disciples are looking down at their shoes, nervous about being sent away, wondering if they were ready, wondering what they were going to encounter. And there Jesus was giving them their last bit of advice. Now the interesting thing here is the very last thing he says to them, his final word before sending them out- it isn't about them at all. It's actually about the people to whom the disciples are being sent. Listen again carefully:

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

Did you notice who the subject here? The subject isn't the disciples anymore- Jesus isn't talking about John, Paul, and Ringo anymore. The subject is *whoever*- it's all the people out there in the world they're going off to meet. *Whoever* welcomes you welcomes me. *Whoever* welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet receives a prophet's reward. *Whoever* welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous

person receives that person's reward. A special note here- when Matthew says in the name of that person, this is just a phrase he uses to mean as or because. So to say whoever receives a prophet in the name of a prophet- just means to receive a prophet because they are a prophet or as a prophet, receives the same reward. So that last sentence reads *whoever* gives even a cold cup of water to one of these little ones because they are a disciple- their reward will not be taken away. And as it turns out Matthew refers to the disciples as little ones throughout the Gospel.

So the text isn't really about *you and me* just being a little bit nicer and doing a few more nice things for folks here and there. It isn't about you and me doing the Gospel by giving cold cups of water- it's actually about other people; and if it's about us at all, it's about us learning how to allow others to welcome us and learning how to be cared for.

So to the first point- getting out there and learning how to be welcomed, or received. Jesus makes such a big deal here to say *whoever* will receive them- he says *whoever* 5 times. 5 times in two verses. Wow. This is a way of saying they aren't going to be able to tell who it is that is going to welcome them. It could be anybody. And this is hard for us, isn't it? Because we have all sorts of ideas of who is going to be able to understand us, who is able to get us.

You know almost everyone in seminary says at some point that they love the story of Jonah, because Jonah resisted his call. God told him to go to Nineveh, but he didn't want to. But it's like we never read the rest of the story, because we sort of read into the text a little bit and guess he refused God's call because he had kids to take care of, or he

didn't live near a seminary, or he had too many doubts- three things that keep some folks from going to seminary. Well this isn't what happened. Jonah didn't follow God because he had doubts- he actually didn't go because of his certainty. He says to God in the 4th chapter of Jonah that he didn't want to go to Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment on all those terrible non Jews because he was afraid they would listen- and if they listened he knew God would pour out God's grace on them. Jonah knew all about the Ninevites- and he didn't want them to receive him, he didn't want God to forgive them. He didn't want them to even have the chance.

When you leave this place today- whether you think about this or not, whether you even like it or not, you are going back into the world to do ministry. One of the great things Dick Wiggers did when he came as our interim pastor is he made a small change to the bulletin. Go ahead turn it over and look at the back. Who are the ministers around here? All of us. All of us. Yeah, I'm your pastor- and that's no small thing. But pastors come and go. You are the ministers of this church. And if you really get this and start to live into this- one of the first things you will realize is there are a lot of people out there you don't necessarily want to care for. There are a lot of folks you just don't like. And you might tell yourself that it's not really your fault, that crazy looking teenagers never listen, or guys with suits are just too closed minded and judgmental, or that person in your family has always been like that and they'll never be any different.

When I was a boy my father did something that hurt me very deeply- it doesn't matter so much what he did anymore, just that I was hurt and angry. I remember telling him I hated him and I stormed into the house and went down the hall to my room and I slammed my door. And I heard my mom talking to him in the hallway, saying something

muffled I couldn't hear. And then I heard his footsteps walking down the hall to my room. And I was ready for him. He opened the door, and he came in, and I just glared at him. And then he did something I never expected him to do- never actually heard him do before, really. He apologized to me. He did. He said he was sorry, and I think in retrospect he probably even meant it a little bit.

But I was angry. And I just sat there. And I wouldn't accept it. I wouldn't accept his apology and I told him so. And now we were both angry. And after saying a few choice words, he stormed out.

Now I'm not saying I wasn't right to be angry. He had done a lot of hurtful things. But I know that the reason I didn't accept his apology was only partly because I was mad. I think in the main I didn't extend my forgiveness, because I was afraid he'd receive it. I was afraid he'd receive it, and receiving this he might even change a little bit, and then I might have to be stuck having more of a relationship with him- more of a real one. And I really didn't want that.

I like to think that my difficult relationship with him is all his fault. But if I'm honest, I didn't really want to forgive him. At some point along the way, I stopped giving him the chance to change.

And then I hear those words. *Whoever* receives you receives me, and *whoever* receives me, receives the one who sent me. *Whoever*.

Maybe the first lesson of ministry is not counting folks out before they've been given a chance, or at least becoming more aware of the folks you want to write off. I wonder who doesn't have a chance in your book? I wonder who you've got all figured

out- who is it in your life you know will never ever change? And whose problem is this- theirs...or ours?

Now, the second lesson Jesus offers the disciples here before they head out is even harder I think. It's about that cold cup of water- that cold cup of water we're not giving, remember, but receiving from others. I think there's a reason we're not very good readers here. I think there's a reason we turn this passage around in our heads and think it's our job to be the givers.

I think there are few things more painful in life than accepting help. I think there are few things harder for us than to gracefully receive help. Not feeling guilty about being helped, not being angry about it- but just gracefully allowing someone to help you out.

How are you at this- at receiving kindness, at receiving help from others? One of the first phrases I learned as a child was "me do", and Melis will tell you it continues to be popular with me. If you're like me accepting help can be, in the words of the great Harvey Firestein, as painful as sliding down a razor blade into a pool of acid.

We like to *give* help. We're good at this. We're good at being on the giving side of things- then we can do our thing, feel good about it, feel competent, and then walk away.

But receiving help? This is so hard. To be at someone else's mercy. To put ourselves in someone else's care. What will they think? What will the people around us think?

And yet- this is Christ's final piece of advice to us before we are sent out. Above all else, he says- learn how to be helped, how to let others cheer you up and befriend you. And it's so true. No one on earth will allow you to care for them if they know it's all a one way street, and you won't allow them to care for you. No one on earth will, or should, listen to a thing you say if they think you aren't willing to listen to them and hear what they have to say in return. If there's someone in your life that you are frustrated about and think why won't they let me help them, why won't they listen to my incredible wisdom for their lives- well ask yourself whether you ever listen to them, whether you respect them enough to share your own challenges and maybe follow their counsel for you now and again. Christ is saying that people don't need advice- there's enough advice flowing around to fill an ocean. What people are hungry for are friends willing to share themselves, friends willing to be vulnerable, willing not just to give a cold cup of water, but who know how to receive one, too.

I leave you with a piece from a woman named Mary Cook, a fiercely independent woman who is a bush pilot in Alaska. She was asked to sum up what she thought was most important in life for a series on the radio called "This I Believe." Mary ended up believing in learning how to receive kindness from others. Hear her words:

"The day my fiancé fell to his death, it started to snow, just like any November day, just like the bottom hadn't fallen out of my world when he freefell off the roof. His body, when I found it, was lightly covered with snow. It snowed almost every day for the next four months, while I sat on the couch and watched it pile up.

One morning, I shuffled downstairs and was startled to see a snowplow clearing my driveway and the bent back of a woman shoveling my walk. I dropped to my knees,

crawled through the living room and back upstairs so those good Samaritans would not see me. I was mortified. My first thought was how would I ever repay them? I didn't have the strength to brush my hair, let alone shovel someone's walk.

Before Jon's death, I took pride in the fact that I rarely asked for help or favors. I defined myself by my competence and independence. So who was I if I was no longer capable and busy? How could I respect myself if all I did was sit on the couch every day and watch the snow fall?

Learning how to receive the love and support that came my way wasn't easy. Friends cooked for me, and I cried because I couldn't even help them set the table. 'I'm not usually this lazy,' I wailed, hating myself. Finally, my friend Kathy sat down with me and said, "Mary, cooking for you is not a chore. I love you and I want to do it. It makes me feel good too be able to do this little thing for you." (From Mary Cook, in This I Believe)

Brothers and sisters in ministry, it may be true that sometimes it is more blessed to give than to receive. But the thing of it is- if we're doing this well we won't always be the ones giving or receiving- we'll take turns. This week if it's your turn to give- give generously. Give without holding anything back. Giving gently, knowing how hard it can be to be on the other side. But this week if it's your turn to receive, why open your hands, open them up wide, and just receive it all without apology, without shame, no matter who it is that's offering. Hey it's hot out there, and sometimes the one thing you need is a cold cup of water. **Amen.**