

Matthew 10 Small Gestures

As chapter 10 began we have two major themes connected to the sending out of the disciples midway through Jesus' ministry—a type of trial run as Jesus tells them the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. When Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and called his first disciples he called them to be fishers of people; now he refers to a harvest, a gathering for which they are needed. As Jesus sends them out he grants them the authority to do all that he has been doing as he traveled throughout the countryside—including healing, casting out demons, and proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom. After granting this authority, he tells them it will not be easy; that there will be rejection and persecution because of what they are doing—what they proclaim will cause divisions within families as well. In the first thirty some verses Jesus speaks of swords and crosses, of where discipleship to him will lead those he sends out. Up until the very end of today's reading, this is still the theme: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." In many ways, this is a reaffirmation of the first commandment given to the Israelites in the wilderness at Sinai: From Exodus 20:1-5 "Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me." This is repeated word for word in Deuteronomy 5:6 and then restated this way in 6:4 by Moses: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." There are so many places throughout Scripture that give us this same message—God has first claim on our loyalties; our obedience; on what we do. In another place in the gospels when Jesus gives his answer to what is the greatest commandment, it is this second quotation from Deuteronomy which he lifts up. So the instructions, the expectations that Jesus voices are not unique. Chapter 10 began with practical instructions about how to conduct the mission; of how to deal with mixed receptions; of what is needed to go as well as the promise that there would be rejection and suffering; the security that the words to proclaim the mission would be provided when needed; and even the nature of the division which obedience to Jesus entails. This is as recapped in the first verse of today's passage. There is a shift in today's passage near the end which contains two themes: welcoming and watering. Verse 40: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." The very tight connection between the mission of Jesus and the disciples he sends out begins when they are given the same authority that he shown in his ministry. That same connection continues here. To welcome Jesus, is to welcome the one whom he has sent, and to welcome the one he has sent is to welcome the Messiah himself. Welcoming, hospitality, is a very basic concept in Scripture—from the earliest welcome that Abraham provided to the strangers who visited his tent to the welcome Jesus showed to the outcasts he encountered as he walked the countryside. Nowhere in Scripture do we find Jesus rejecting—being rejected, but not rejecting others no matter their status or condition—always welcoming those who came to him. The question here is do we consider welcoming and hospitality a part of our discipleship. As I read the final verses of this set of instructions on discipleship, this thought came to me. To what extent is hospitality—the welcoming of others part of our discipleship to Jesus Christ who welcomed all that he encountered. When we are thinking of discipleship it seems we often go to one extreme or the

other—we totally center it on ourselves and our actions—our “righteousness”; our obedience to what we perceive as God’s will. Yet it seems that discipleship according to Jesus was anything but self-centered. Just before he makes the connection with welcoming, Jesus states: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Concentrating on self was not the way of Jesus. It was about going out to all nations—reaching out to others in caring and in love. Yes, love and loyalty to God was placed as the first priority, but the way that love was shown could be summed up in what Jesus used as the follow-up to the greatest commandment—to love your neighbor as yourself—and his definition of neighbor was pretty much expansive and inclusive when you consider all those to whom Jesus showed love. The second extreme we usually come up with when considering discipleship is demonstrated by those we think or lift up as good examples— those we believe exemplify the self-giving called for by Christ: those who leave “normal” lives to live for others—like Mother Teresa or those who go to other places to live and work in conditions we find appalling. We look at the call to go out and heal as something beyond our ability. We see the healing, restoring work of Jesus—with which the first apostles were empowered as being beyond our abilities, so we usually fail to translate that into a model of discipleship that we follow. We often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or entail great feats of courage and discipline. We look at the lives of someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the stand that he took against Hitler; those like Desmond Tutu who opposed Apartheid in South Africa; or Martin Luther King, Jr. and his leadership for civil rights. These were people who based on their faith challenged the injustices around them. These are examples of what discipleship can come to. But it seems to me that in this passage Jesus is offering another option, that we are being told that discipleship doesn’t have to be heroic. Discipleship for Jesus cannot be self-centered, but if we take another look at this passage with the understanding that welcoming, showing hospitality to others, caring for them is also integral to our discipleship, our relationship with Jesus, then there are actions which we can do and can understand as part of our call to follow Jesus. Our discipleship includes all the small acts of kindness which we offer—small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that largely go unnoticed but tend the relationships that are most important to us, and in the doing of them bring us closer to God. Think on the portion of the Lord’s prayer we will offer later. We desire our debts to be forgiven, but Jesus connected that to our offering forgiveness to others. In the last verses of this passage Jesus connects the welcome given to the reward received. Verse 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.” What Jesus has instructed the disciples to do on this mission is to do is what we are commanded to do—but we think we are not healers and skip over this as part of our discipleship. But these acts of Jesus are always introduced as he saw and had compassion. This is how Jesus announced the nearness of the kingdom through compassion for the ills of those he met. We are called to be Christ-like in our discipleship—to have compassion—to aid in healing wounds of the heart and spirit through forgiveness and to show love to others by offering welcome—acceptance in the name of our Lord. These actions aren’t necessarily heroic—don’t really call for great sacrifice—just call for us to be more in tune with the desire of God for us to be in community with one another where community is inclusive of all. Throughout this passage we are reminded that the disciples are to act “in the name of”; that what they do is “for my sake”. Whenever we act

with compassion, whenever we volunteer to help someone else, whenever we visit or listen to someone's in the need of a friend, make a donation to help others, send a card to cheer someone; these are part of that chain of discipleship which demonstrates God's love for us all. The last line of this passage really stands out for me this week. Verse 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." What a little thing that would seem to be; to give a cup of cold water. Jesus emphasizes the same thing by his use of the word "even". 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. Loren Eiseley wrote a story called the "star thrower". It is about a guy tossing starfish after starfish back into the sea. When asked why, he replies that if they don't get back into the water soon, they'll dry out and die. Looking at a beach strewn with thousands of starfish, his questioner responds that he can't possibly hope to make any difference. To which the star thrower says—in the final line of the story—"To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world." That is exactly what we need to remember. 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. Because of that we can in the meantime devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large—not in trying to save the world—that is what Jesus has promised to do. But we are called to simply care for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed. And to realize that even a cup of cold water can make a large and unexpected difference to those to whom we give it. According to Jesus, such small acts, well within our ability and gifts, have eternal and cosmic consequences. Each and every act of mercy and compassion rings throughout 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 receive or witness them. In living our lives of discipleship, there are no small gestures when done in the name of our Lord. Amen.