

June 29 – A Hand to Hold

Matthew 10:42-44

There is a challenge within the simplicity of this statement of Jesus. Whoever welcomes others in the name of Christ is in reality also welcoming him. To those who offer even so little as a cup of cold water, they will receive their reward. We think, can it really be that big of a deal, offering a little kindness? Is there any real reward?

William Willimon, a teacher, writer and bishop tells this story. Bishop Ken Goodson went to dinner at the end of a church conference. Surrounded by friends and colleagues, Bishop Goodson welcomed the waitress who was serving his table, and as they circled hands to say a prayer before the meal, he invited the young waitress to join them. He thanked God for the day and asked God to bless the food, to be with them in their time of fellowship and throughout the night. And then with the worn out hand of the waitress wrapped up in his own, he prayed, “God, we thank you for our waitress this evening. We thank you for the way she has cared for us and served us so well. If there is anything hurting her, if there is any place where she needs your healing, grant her your presence and your love in the same way that she has been so gracious to us this evening. Amen.” Bishop Goodson looked up and there were tears streaming down the young woman’s face, and with her hands still bound in the circle, she had no way to wipe them off. “Thank you,” she said. “Today has been a terrible day. Nothing in my life is going right just now. How did you know?”

In hearing that story can any of us doubt the importance of that seemingly insignificant gesture on the life of that waitress? She was having a terrible day, nothing was going right and then she was asked to join a group in prayer and found them praying for her! I am sure the rest of her day went just a little better because of that moment.

Bishop Goodson, in praying with and for her, did not know her situation or did he? I am not saying he knew the particulars but don’t we all need a hand to hold, someone to share a meal with? A little prayer offered on our behalf, to drive away the darkness, to destroy the isolation. Of course we do. This is why Jesus said that those

sharing even a cup of water will not lose their reward. I doubt there is a person here who is not carrying around with them some hurt, some pain of loss, or feelings of being scared. We need a hand to hold, to know someone is praying for us, caring about us. They don't need to know the details, we just need a hand to hold. Bishop Goodson did not know that it had been a terrible day for that waitress, but he did know that she needed a hand to hold, a word of care, a moment of support because this is a part of the human condition.

Think about all the ways you can offer a hand to hold to another. It can be the offering of a smile to the harried check-out person who is ringing up your order at the grocery store. It can be you putting your hand on a friend's shoulder and saying, "I have been keeping you in my prayers." Now you might know of something they are struggling with but it can also be a prayer offered because we all, as I said, know that others carry with them hurt or loss. Sometimes it can be an action that takes more effort on our part, such as taking time to visit one in the hospital or care facility or offering to drive someone to a doctor's appointment. Jesus word about offering a cup of cold water is a reminder that we all are hurting, we all have needs and we are challenged to do what we can to invite people into our circle of caring and hold their hand. Also, when we are hurting we need to be willing to ask for help, to grasp the hands being offered. We need to ask continually to be saved from the sin of self-reliance.

When we hold hands sharing our pain and praying for others in their need we are an active part of the community of God. Through that community God can pour grace into our fragmented lives, which is all well and good. But there is a problem. God's grace can be so scary, if only it didn't come with so much risk! Extending the circle to another involves the risk of rejection, the risk of laughter, the risk of tears, and the risk of love. The story of Bishop Goodson could have ended so differently. The waitress could have pulled back and refused to be a part of the prayer. She could have laughed at his faith. She could have made a crack about needing an extra big tip for putting up with being forced to pray with them. Yes, all of this could have happened and Bishop Goodson was willing to risk rejection because he understands the pain that we all carry with us. And when we open ourselves to receiving the grace others would give us, it

comes with risk. We have to admit that we are in need, that we are vulnerable and that we are wounded. Most of us try to hide behind a mask of competency and so it is risky to be open to grace.

We need to be reminded frequently that Jesus challenges us to reach out to others in love. It is something we know we should do but I've heard it said that the problem with others is that they are just so other. Others might not like us. Others might refuse our kindness. Others might wound us. Others might persecute us. Others might crucify us. For these reasons we strive to only share the cup of water of grace cautiously and safely with those we know will appreciate it. Jesus wants us to do more. We are to offer a cup of water, a hand to hold, a compassionate ear to all, even when it is risky. We have to be willing to receive the same from others, not just safe friends and family.

Sharing grace with others most likely will change us. So much for small acts. There are no small acts when done in Christ's name. Each and every time we do anything intentionally for and in the name of Christ there are ripple effects. Some we can see as others' burdens are lifted, as in the story. The other side is that those ripples wash over us as well and change us. This is why Jesus asks us to welcome and share. He is always trying to change us. He never leaves us alone. He wants us to be good. He wants us to be faithful. He loves us and expects us to love others. He welcomes us and so we welcome others. The call to offer a cup of cold water to another is not so their thirst will be quenched, though it will, but because the act will change us. This is what it means to be in community. It is the answer to our own sadness, our loneliness, and our deepest desires. Holding the hand of another and offering grace also opens us to receive grace. Jesus knows we were not created to live in isolation but created to live within a divine community of love.

We too often forget the call to community. We are too often focused on our needs. Because living in community means dealing with all those others, we pull back. We nurse hurt feelings when another had done something that displeases us. We refuse to help because another we dislike is in charge. We don't ask for help because we have always done it on our own. Offering a cup of cold water in Jesus name means

being intentional about living in community. It means forgiving and forgetting past wrongs. It means helping and receiving. This is how we will receive the rewards Jesus is talking about.

We need to understand that the reward we are offered is that we know deep to our core that we belong to a community, a community of love that cares for us, holds our hands when we are hurting, even if they don't know the specific cause of our pain. And we are blessed and renewed by knowing that we help others, even those who are so "other" and, in the risking to extend the circle, know we have been faithful.

God created us for community. Let us confess when we have rejected that gift because of our issues. Help us to see that in each person Christ is present, that they provide us an opportunity to serve him. Let us hold hands and grow in faith.