

"Your Welcome"

Matthew 10:40-42

Baron De Rothschild was one of the richest men who ever lived. Legend has it that the Baron once posed for the artist, Ary Scheffer, as a beggar. While Scheffer was painting him, the financier and wine mogul sat before him in rags and tatters holding a tin cup. A friend of the artist entered. The baron was so well disguised that he was not recognized. Thinking he was really a beggar, the visitor dropped a coin into the cup.

Ten years later, the man who gave the coin to Rothschild received a letter containing a bank order for 10,000 francs and the following message: "You one day gave a coin to Baron de Rothschild in the studio of Ary Scheffer. He has invested it and today sends you the capital which you entrusted to him, together with the compounded interest. A good action always brings good fortune. Signed, Baron de Rothschild." A simple act of kindness was bountifully rewarded.

In our lesson from The Gospel According to Matthew this morning, Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." Even a cup of cold water, says Jesus, given to one of his little ones will be rewarded. This passage raises some observations to make this morning; observations about our faith.

The first observation is this: at the heart of Christian faith is giving. "God so loved the world that He gave ..." When I was in Princeton Seminary, we had the opportunity to hear the great American anthropologist Margaret Mead at the University. During the question and answer period following her lecture, Mead was asked to name what she considered to be the earliest sign of civilization in any given

culture. We expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fish hook or grinding stone; something that demonstrated industry, or work specialization, or primitive technology. Her answer took us completely by surprise. It was "a healed femur." The femur, of course, is a bone in the leg.

Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

Faith becomes Christian only with compassion. How will they know we are Christians? "By our love," an old song goes. Christians do not live by the law of the jungle but by the law of love. We only have to survey the ministry of Jesus to see that. There was nothing self-serving in anything he ever did. That is our first observation then; at the very heart of our faith is giving.

This leads us to the second observation to make: We give to help others. Jesus says, "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones..." Did you know, that the word "chapel" comes from the Latin word capella, which means "cloak?" According to tradition, the word originated with the life of St. Martin, a Roman soldier who gave his cloak to a beggar freezing from cold.

St. Martin's cloak became a relic and was kept in a building that soon took on the cloak's name, capella. In France the word became CHAPELLE, and in England it was CHAPEL. However you pronounce it, a chapel is a cloak of God for those in need. And because we know ourselves to be in need where the grace of God is concerned, we do not shun the needy of this world. We give to help others.

That leads us to our third observation this morning: giving is the work of God. You may have noticed that the first part of our Gospel lesson said a lot about welcoming; welcoming the prophet, the disciple, the righteous person, and each other. This kind of welcoming, though, is way more than just a “Hey, how are you?” or a, “Glad to see you!” (Though those are good for openers!) When we give a genuine welcome as Jesus is referring to here, we are drawing that person into our lives as well as our space. We are giving the promise of sharing our persons with the one welcomed. Such a welcome, Jesus is saying to us, is a welcome of him. Welcoming others in Christ’s name is a real ministry. Some of us are truly gifted at this and have been blessed with a spiritual gift for doing this kind of ministry. But, gifted or not, all of us are called upon to be welcomers of Christ through our welcome of others. Giving the welcome is the work of God.

Remember, Jesus was sending his followers out into a very cruel world. Often they were totally dependent on the kindness of strangers in the places that they visited. "Remember," Jesus is saying, "when you receive one of them and help them and give them even a cup of cold water, you are doing it to me." Only through this kind of giving welcome does Christ’s message survive. Only through such ministering can the church itself survive in a hostile world.

We are working now toward the reopening of our facilities, so as make it possible for us to gather safely together again physically even as we are currently doing remotely. Along with this planning is a revival of our Invite, Welcome, Connect ministry. Those of you who have been part of this effort in the past know what it means to call it a ministry. As we reopen, we will also restart this giving ministry of welcome to all. To do this work of God is the highest privilege we can have. To welcome others into the presence and love of God, not just as family into our church, but as immigrant citizens into our nation, and as friends into our lives, to be working for the saving of humanity, the transformation

of the world itself, what calling could be higher or more noble? Besides this, in God's economy you never know what profound good can come out of even the smallest gift of welcome.

A particular congregation was buying and packing Christmas gifts for a missionary family. After meticulously selecting the presents based on the family's needs, sizes, and ages, a group of members gathered to pack them. That's when another member whisked in and plopped a brand-new gentleman's overcoat on the table. Her husband didn't like the style, she said. As she turned to go, she suggested that maybe one of the missionaries could use it.

A few folks were offended. The coat wouldn't fit anyone in the missionary family. Obviously, she had not given much thought or time to the project. Then again, it was a rather splendid coat. Maybe it might have a purpose. As the other presents did not completely fill the barrel they were packing, they folded the coat and tucked it in. It made perfect packing material.

After Christmas, a thank you letter arrived from the missionary family. They thanked the church for their many gifts and especially for the "miracle" gift. On that Christmas Morning, it seems, a completely unexpected and freezing storm had suddenly struck. Nothing was moving outside in the village. Cozy inside their home the family gathered round with great expectation to finally open the gifts in the barrel the congregation had sent. Just then, there was a knock at the door. A traveler stood on their stoop. He was so ill-dressed for the cold, they welcomed him to stay until the storm passed. Even though their visitor would have no gifts in the barrel, they decided to make him part of their celebration anyway, offering him food and warming drink as they opened it. That's when they discovered the coat. It fit the man perfectly. He protested that it was much too fine a gift, but they told him about the meaning of Christmas and the gifts of the kings to the

King of Kings. At that, the man smiled and accepted the gift. After the storm passed, the traveler headed out for home cloaked in its splendor.

A few days later, the family entered a new village in which they were to begin work. They were met by this very man. He was the chief of that village. He now welcomed them and assembled the entire village to hear the Good News of Jesus and his welcoming love.

Do such things really happen in this world? Yes they do; all the time! We never know when we give that cup of cold water in welcome in the name of Christ, what wonders may happen. That is what Jesus is saying to us about the cup of cold water. Christian faith is centered in giving, giving to others, giving as the work of God. Do the work of God! Give your welcome! Give the welcome that welcomes Christ!