



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of our one loving, living, and life-giving God. Please be seated.

This week concludes our third consecutive week in chapter ten of Matthew's gospel. A whole chapter covering Jesus' discourse to the apostles as they are being sent out as Christ's missionaries on their own for the first time. Two weeks ago, He told them He is sending them out to proclaim the good news, and while they're at it, to cure diseases and cast out demons. Last week, as well as in a portion of chapter ten that is not included in the Sunday lectionary, he tells them that they are going out like sheep into the midst of wolves, warning them of the persecutions they will face, the family divisions he will cause, and the need to take up one's cross in order to be worthy of Him.

Today's reading, though, has a sudden change of tone, focusing not on persecution and discord, but on welcome and reward. "Whoever welcomes you," He tells the apostles, "welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the Father who sent me. Those who welcome a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and those who welcome a righteous person receive the reward of the righteous. No one who gives even a cup of cold water to the little ones in the name of a disciple will lose their reward."

The message is obvious, isn't it? The key takeaway from all this talk about welcome and reward as the apostles are being sent out to do Jesus' bidding is perfectly clear, right? Jesus wants you to be nice to your clergy. While I do think that that is true, I have to admit that my reading of the passage may have been a bit clouded by recent events. As Manisha pointed out, your preacher and your celebrant today are since a few days ago, the two newest priests in the Diocese of Michigan, both of us now called to serve other parishes out yonder from here. So I naturally took it as a happy, divine coincidence that the focus of today's gospel message is on the rewards of welcoming those who are sent in the name of the Lord.

But of course, I know the reading is about more than that. Yes, Jesus in this discourse is specifically addressing the apostles who He is sending out, giving them words of encouragement that there are people out there who will welcome them and be rewarded for it. But the words have a much broader application. The roles are not that clear-cut. There is no sharp dichotomy between those who are

sent and those who have the opportunity to welcome them. No one has only one role. All of us are sent.

As Bishop Bonnie reminded us as part of the ordination services this week, all baptized people are called to make Christ known as Lord and Savior and to share in the renewing of the world. And all of us have the opportunity to welcome others in the name of the Lord every day. Sometimes we even have both roles, the one doing the welcoming and the one being welcomed in the same encounter. We welcome and enrich one another.

Our youth are just now starting their mission trip to Puerto Rico. Now, I was not part of the preparation or instruction for that trip, but still I am confident that the leaders who were made sure that all of the participants understand that they are not going as saviors to help the helpless, but going as partners to be with and learn from those they will meet. Everyone has something to offer. We learn from each other. We help each other grow. Missionaries do not bring Christ to where they go. They go and find that He is already there, for He resides in everyone. When Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me," the "you" needs to be given an expansive reading. Yes, in the specific context of the passage, when Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you," the "you" He was referring to means the apostles He was sending out. But the applicability of the statement is much broader than that. "Whoever welcomes you," whoever you are, "welcomes me."

That is, in fact, what Jesus came to say more explicitly later in Matthew in the sheep and goats discourse, blessing those on His right hand for welcoming Him, when He says what they did was welcome the stranger. Those on His left hand were cursed because by failing to welcome the stranger, they failed to welcome Jesus. It was on this basis that way back in the sixth century, St. Benedict made it a rule for his monks that, quote, "All guests who present themselves at the monastery are to be welcomed as Christ."

Of course, it is easier said than done to welcome everyone as Christ. How can we treat someone we don't even know as Christ? How can we welcome someone on the opposite side of the political spectrum, whose values we detest, as Christ? At the outset, I think we need to check our defaults. How do we, by default, view the anonymous strangers in our midst, the ones about whom we lack any basis for making an actual informed opinion? Do we see them by default as persons against whom we need to protect ourselves, lest they take advantage of us or harm us in some way? Or do we see them by default as people in it with us, who present not so much a threat as an opportunity through whom or with whom we can maybe make the world a better place? If we are to welcome all as Christ, then clearly it is the latter.

And what about those about whom we do have some information, such as, for example, their political affiliation as revealed by bumper stickers on their vehicle or the hat they wear? Although it may be hard to be ready to welcome those on the other side from us as Christ, we are called to do so just as much as for any other person. Indeed, I would submit that they are fundamentally no different than a perfect stranger. The conclusions we jump to based on superficial indicia are not the same as truly knowing them. Knowing them means coming to understand how they came to hold the positions that they hold, the experiences that impacted them, the losses they have suffered and endured, and perhaps from that, seeing that they offer perspectives that maybe can change ours.

In her book, *"See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love,"* Valerie Kaur invites us to approach all others, even those we might otherwise view as opponents, with openness and wonder, recognizing first and foremost our profound interconnectedness that transcends our differences. Here is the default she recommends: "You are not a stranger. You are just a part of me that I haven't had the chance to get to know yet." "You are not a stranger. You're just a part of me that I haven't gotten the chance to know yet."

Kaur happens to be of the Sikh tradition, but her approach to revolutionary love, as revealed in that passage, aligns fully with the teachings of Jesus generally and in today's passage in particular, and with our Christian belief that we can encounter Christ in every person we meet. When we welcome others, whoever they are, we welcome Christ. We abide in one another, and He in us. The approach we take on this matters. The decision whether to treat the stranger by default as someone out to get us or someone in it with us through whom we can encounter Christ if we just take the time to get to know them matters. It affects how we treat each other, and that in turn determines the kind of world we will live in.

This does not require grandiose efforts. We don't have to venture out without provisions like the apostles. As Jesus says in our reading today, a little gesture like a cup of cold water is enough. What might a cup of cold water look like? A helpful gesture to someone needing assistance. Not letting the press of things impede our civility. Being willing to listen without demonizing. Seeking to understand without trying to change or vanquish.

Our opportunities to make a difference show up for us every day and everywhere in the midst of the ordinary, and this matters especially today in our very fractured times. Healing our divisions will ultimately depend more on what is happening in our face-to-face encounters than on what is happening in Washington. Jesus has got the big picture. We just have to watch out for our little corners. When we believe that what we do in our immediate vicinity matters to shaping the broader society, acts of simple decency matter. Giving others the benefit of the doubt,

letting everyone have the chance to feel seen and heard without being blamed and condemned, practicing restraint rather than reacting in anger.

As difficult as those things may sometimes be in practice, at the end of the day, they do matter. Little by little, our individual actions make a difference. What we do and say and the behaviors we model shape our society and our world. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me works both ways, don't forget. Like it or not, we represent Christ to those who have the opportunity to welcome us. Let our witness be guided accordingly. With God's help, let us strive to be, as Paul put it in today's letter to the Romans, slaves to righteousness, where doing what Jesus teaches is no longer something that feels like a choice we have to make, but instead becomes something we just can't not do.

What kind of world do you want to live in? How we behave, how we treat those around us will be part of what determines that. In the meantime, though, there is something else that I do ask you to remember is also still true. Jesus wants you to be nice to your brother.