

A Cup of Cold Water
Matthew 10:37-42

Our Gospel reading for today is a little puzzling at first glance. When we read the words of Jesus about loving our parents less than we love him, we might take offense. Why should our love for our families be in competition with our love for Christ? Isn't it family God's way of helping us find support and love in life? Isn't one of the Ten Commandments about honoring our fathers and mothers? On the surface, we may feel that Jesus is asking us to leave the people we love in order to prove our love for him. Also, there is the question about losing one's life in order to find it through Christ. Was Jesus talking about losing one's ego self in order to be more true to one's real self? Yet, if we look closely at the context of our reading we see that there is a deeper call behind the words from Matthew 10.

During the time of Jesus, family was very important to the well-being of each person. Family in the Middle East till this day is so central to one's identity. The first question about your identity in the Middle East is not what you do for a living but who is your family? Yet, the family structure was very patriarchal where the male head of the house not only provided for the house but also dominated it. It was a system of subordination and even oppression for women and children. Family was also focused on itself without the bigger picture of the common good. So, as Jesus called out his disciples to follow him, he was inviting them to a new kind of family. They had to leave their comfort zone of blood connections in order to learn and teach about God's love. They had to learn that their definition of family needed to be more inclusive and more radical because the call of Christ was to serve and love the whole human family. Jesus tried to reform the people's sense of family. Blood connection was so important for a tribal society, but Jesus tried to help people see family as a place for faith, growth, empowerment and liberation. Family is not only about being born into a certain group of people, but about being nurtured and loved as a child of God. This sense of family is not limited to one group of people. It is about the love and faith that is shared. Jesus' own family misunderstood his message because it was outside of their comfort zone. He did not act according to the teachings of his day. Because they felt the obligation to make him into a good person, like most families do, they wanted him to follow the rules and be a good man. William Sloane Coffin, a well-known preacher and teacher, once said, "Had Jesus heeded both his parents and the religious authorities of his day, instead of saving the world he would have become the best carpenter in Nazareth. Were our children to heed us and the religious authorities of our day, they'd all become nicely packaged citizens –safe, polite, and obedient."

Chapter 10 of the Gospel of Matthew is about the teachings of Jesus for his disciples about their mission and ministry. They were to dress simply. They were to expect persecutions by government, synagogue and family. They were to extend their understanding of family based on their connection with Christ and not based on our tribal blood connections. This was a radical call for commitment and discipleship. They would leave their comforts of family and friends to go out to the world and depend on the hospitality of strangers, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." They were also to learn about true service of others, this is the kind of service that is filled with God's grace because it was unconditional. It only depended on God's care and not on whether people were related to them or not. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of a nun who, although she has Alzheimer's, still asks to be rolled in her wheelchair to the door of her nursing home so she can greet every guest. One nun said about her sister in ministry, "She is no longer certain what she is welcoming people to...but hospitality is so deeply ingrained in her that it has become her whole life." Norris continues, "I read somewhere, in an article on monastic spirituality, that only people who are basically at home, and at home in themselves, can offer hospitality...hospitality has a way of breaking through our insularity." The image of discipleship which Jesus gives to his disciples is that of offering a cup of cold water to one of these little ones. Discipleship or following the example and love of Christ is not

about glory and success. It is about service and love of those who are considered unimportant. We even become unimportant ourselves in the process of serving those who are neglected or rejected by society. The text seems to suggest that disciples, prophets, holy people are “little ones,” because loving God and living a life of fullness are about loving others, and not just those who love us such as our family members, but all of God’s human family. This is a tall order. The task of a disciple is not to be undertaken lightly - it is a whole-hearted commitment that leads to a radical kind of life where we let go of our comfort zones to serve. William Wilimon, a United Methodist bishop and teacher once wrote, “If only God’s grace weren’t 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...of tears...of love.”

There is an old story told about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She was asked how it was that she could continue to tend the sickest and most wretched of the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. Mother Teresa said that as she looked at each person for whom she was caring she tried to imagine that she was tending the Lord Jesus’ wounded body – His nail-scarred hands, feet, and side. And so it was that in each act of caring, the Kingdom of God embraced and even reached out through Mother Teresa as she welcomed Christ in her neighbor and as she embraced the neighbor as if that person were Christ Himself! A cup of cold water is a symbol of hospitality and welcome. It is about welcoming Christ himself in the world. Today we celebrate the graduation of our high school youth. This is a critical step for them as they leave their comfort zones of family support. They have received a cup of cold water and love by their families, friends, school and church. They have also learned to live a life of service to others as they served on mission trips, and other service projects. So, today we remind them as we remind ourselves of the calling of Christ to see that our family is bigger than the family we have here. We are part of the human family and through the grace and love of God we are called to serve others as an act of hospitality to God in the world. And now, three of our young people will share with you their reflections about discipleship in this church and beyond.

Casey: I will take the messages, sermons, and feelings that this church community has given me and use them in my life everyday. I plan to not only keep church a big part of my life throughout college but also for the rest of my life. I will never stop thinking, questioning, and most of all believing in all that this church has opened up for me... thank you all !!!!
I have been given a cup of cold water and now I pray to give it to others. (pour some water into the baptismal font)

Valerie: The piece of my faith that I will always carry with me is that God is everywhere. No matter where we go or what we do, He’ll always be with us, we can always go to Him for anything, and He will love us unconditionally for all eternity.
I have been given a cup of cold water and now I pray to give it to others. (pour some water into the baptismal font)

Suzanna: Next year at college and when I continue on in my life, I will know that my religion and my church will always be rocks upon which I can depend. I hope to show God’s love through my actions.
I have been given a cup of cold water and now I pray to give it to others. (pour some water into the baptismal font)

Roula: So, as you continue on this journey of faith and now leaving your homes to find new homes, we invite you to remember that ultimately what truly matters in life is your love. All of us have the temptation before us that our educational, financial or social accomplishments are what makes us successful and happy. But the truth of the Gospel challenges us to see true joy

in life only comes from our commitment to love and serve. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and a great teacher once wrote, "Because we love, God is present."

There was once a king who had no son, and longed for an heir who would succeed him to the throne. So he posted a notice, inviting young men to apply to be considered for adoption into his family, and to become his heir. All that he asked of the applicants was that they should love God, and love their neighbor. A poor orphaned peasant boy saw the notice, but he thought that he would have no chance of becoming adopted by the king because of the ragged clothes he wore. So he worked very hard, until he had just enough money to buy a new set of clothes. Wearing his new clothes, he then set off to the royal palace, to apply for the position of the king's adopted son. As he was journeying towards the palace, the boy met a poor beggar on the road. The old man was shivering with cold, and the boy felt sorry for him, and exchanged clothes with him. As he was now back to wearing beggar's clothes, it seemed hardly worth going on towards the king's palace. However, having come so far already, the boy decided to keep going, and at least see the king's palace from the outside. When he arrived, he was greeted by scornful laughter and sneering remarks by the guards. Nevertheless, he was finally admitted into the presence of the king. There was something strangely familiar about the king. At first, the boy couldn't work out what it was, and why he felt so at home in his presence. Then he realized that the king himself was wearing the clothes that he had given to the old beggar just a few hours ago along the road. The king came down from his throne and embraced the boy, holding him close in his arms. "Welcome, my son," he said. Amen