

Cold Water Welcome

Matthew 10:40-42; reading from Jennifer McBride

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Prospect United Church of Christ
Seattle, WA July 2, 2017

Grace and peace to you from our God who creates, redeems, and sustains us all. Amen.

Each of us has some story we recall about cold water. One of my memories involved something I thought maybe wasn't a great way as a guest preacher to start a sermon. But then I came across a quote from writer Daniel Tosh that said it for me: "I don't know, maybe I'm immature, but I still find it funny if I dump cold water on my partner when she's in the shower." I am not confessing that's exactly my memory but close enough. The point isn't to show what a fun guy I am. The point is what it feels like to be doused with cold water. Once on the giving end of such dousing, one soon ends up being on the receiving end. What is experienced is shock. Sometimes a scream.

In my work, such playfulness has lost its luster. I meet too many for whom a cold water shower itself is a gift. Hot water would be heaven, and even a playful dousing with cold water would be acceptable. For those homeless, a shower is a luxury. Often it involves a wait, maybe 60 at a shelter waiting for 1 of 3 available shower heads. This year 11,643 persons in King County were officially counted as homeless, though as always the number is actually higher. Using a different protocol, we know that K-12 schools Statewide indicated 39,671 students were homeless for all or part of last school year.

George Santayana, "What brings enlightenment is experience, in the sad sense of this word--the pressure of hard facts and unintelligible troubles, making a (person) rub (one's) eyes in (a) waking dream, and put two and two together. Enlightenment is cold water."

The Gospel reveals that enlightenment is cold water, but it asks more than understanding. Cold water is doing what Jesus asks us to do.

As Eugene Peterson says, “Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water,...”

There is this old *Peanuts* comic strip, with its star character Charlie Brown at rest in bed, staring up at the ceiling. His words are, “Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, ‘Where have I gone wrong?’ Then a voice says to me, ‘This is going to take more than one night.’” I am often challenging myself and others, like you, to consider what we know against what we do. The evangelist Matthew calls what we are to do, as people following Jesus, is welcome.

Author Christine Pohl has written a thorough book titled, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. She says that “offering care to strangers became one of the distinguishing marks of the Christian Gospel and of the Church.” Now, by strangers she didn't mean those with privilege and/or means of some sort. She writes, “Strangers are people without a place. To be without a place means to be detached from basic, life-supporting institutions --- family, work, polity, religious communities, and to be without networks of relations that sustain and support human beings.”

She goes on, “The distinctive quality of Christian hospitality is that it offers a generous welcome to the ‘least,’ without concern for the advantage or benefit to the host.” She of course refers to the clear words which we know in Matthew 25:35, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” I often find it odd that we as people of faith and followers of Jesus, in particular regarding the New Testament, that we do not count these words as a command,... as a duty,... as words at the ready every day for the strangers we meet. I hear folks who are homeless called lawbreakers by communities. I wonder, if Matthew 25 is law within our hearts, who exactly is breaking which laws?

The responsibility we bear toward the stranger exceeds even what it appears to merit on the surface. Pohl tells us,... “to welcome strangers into a distinctly Christian environment without coercing them into conformity

requires that their basic well-being not be dependent on sharing certain commitments.” In the area of ending homelessness, we call such an intention by the name “housing first,” where, for example, we don’t ask an alcoholic to stop drinking first to merit a safe home, but rather, we provide the home, the safety, that helps guide more responsible living. Oh, and it is about 80% less costly to society, for those counting. There are two such buildings in Seattle, one by Plymouth Housing Group, and hopefully more to come.

Pohl continues this thinking as she writes, “When their basic well-being is under attack by the larger society, Christians have a responsibility to welcome endangered persons into their lives, (congregations), and communities.” In short, it is not simply advice from Jesus, it is not simply advice in the sacred scripture,... it is the revelation of a duty.

Sometimes we make a valiant effort. As Pohl writes, “Many (congregations) prepare and serve meals to hungry neighbors, but few members find it easy to sit and eat with those who need the meal.” In the weekly text study in which I participate with your pastor, another colleague said that she’d interviewed for a job at a local faith-based provider, and after she was hired, the employer said, “we picked you because you were the only candidate who went to sit with those having our free lunch.” That is why there is always the need for a prophet among us. It need not be a prophet in a pulpit. Prophets sometimes sit, as Elijah with the strangers at the river, and listen. Prophets unnerve us and we often would rather not have them among us. Pohl has a wonderful term for this courage, as she says, “Rather than being overwhelmed by the heartlessness and by the need, some understand their welcome to strangers as ‘little moves against destructiveness.’” Little moves. That is all it takes to begin. The courage to be “with.”

Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist pastor who served in Hell’s Kitchen New York and is credited with founding what is called *The Social Gospel* wrote, “To uncounted people...the main concern in religion was to escape God’s hands. Luther longed that he ‘might at last have a gracious God.’” He proceeds to say that in our seeing and having a God everyone feared, we created a view of each other that was based largely on favor. From whom could we earn favor?”

Not so odd that earning favor so attracts us, given we privately wonder, “where have I gone wrong?” and realize that altering our path will “take more than one night.” Dorothy Day says, “Mistakes there were, there are, there will be,... The biggest mistake, sometimes, is to play things very safe in this life and end up being moral failures.”

Now is a good time to take a fresh look at not only ourselves, but at our God. Rauschenbusch, writes, “The saving power of the church does not rest on its institutional character, on its continuity, its ordination, its ministry, or its doctrine. It rests on the presence of the Kingdom of God within her.” Rauschenbusch wrote that sentence 115 years ago and it is truer today than ever. As Rauschenbusch wrote, “When we learn from the gospels, for instance, that God is on the side of the poor, and that God proposes to view anything done or not done to them as having been done or not done to (God), such a revelation of solidarity and humanity comes with a regenerating shock to our selfish minds. Any one studying life as it is on the basis of real estate and bank clearings would come to the conclusion that God is on the side of the rich. It takes a revelation to see it the other way.”

Look around. We clearly need a shock. We need revelation. God needs to pour that cold water over us. Perhaps again. Martin Luther King Jr. knew that water. He talked about the power of being baptized by water in the victory of the Birmingham campaign. Recall, he went to jail and wrote, “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.” But he said, we won because, “we knew water.” Jennifer McBride calls it the “power of baptism spilling out into the street...” She goes on, “...through the simple act of answering the door and giving a cup of cold water, we become a people who can no longer do otherwise ... Through daily acts of welcome and embrace we become formed into agents of justice and peace.” Welcome. People who welcome. Before we know it we are outside our building spilling into the streets as baptized people seeking to alleviate harm.

Still we are not easily exhorted to disrupt our lives. We need something like a shock. Whether it is cold water or God’s word. Poet Antonio Machado best captured what I believe God desires of us,... it is my favorite poem, translated

from the Spanish... “I love Jesus who said to us:/Heaven and earth will pass away./When heaven and earth have passed away,/My word will remain./What was your word, Jesus?/Love? Affection? Forgiveness?/All your words were/ One word: Wakeup.”

One way to experience God’s revelation of welcome is to experience a church that is open to the kingdom. I’ve visited such churches, and one I recall especially. It was in Mexico, outside Cuernavaca. We were on a two week study trip. Our hosts took us out into a small village for Sunday Mass. When we arrived, what we saw was a 3-sided church with a partial roof. One whole wall was missing, and wandering in and out of that gap were dogs, sheep, chickens, and other animals. Inside there was an altar, and chairs set facing the front and one side of the altar. The priest put his vestments on right at the altar. They had no sacristy. We sat and celebrated mass in this building that was soon full, overflowing with people and animals out into the space where that 4th wall would have stood. The Mass was in Spanish, so we wore headsets to hear the translation. There was a children’s choir that was by far the largest, loudest, and most off-key choir I have ever heard. Good technique didn’t matter though. When the time for Holy Communion arrived, our group of ten was invited forward first to take the Body and Blood of Jesus. As soon as we returned to our seats, Communion ended, the Mass proceeded, and concluded. We asked our guide what happened at the Holy Communion? Why were we the only ones communed? And he said, “Because there was only enough bread for the guests, for you, so you were given Holy Communion while no one else received.” Words could not describe the shock to our pride... we said in our privilege, “we could have brought more bread!” Humility beckoned us.

We had few words then, and as few now, for what we were given that day. It is only in the revelation that comes with remembering that story that I can say with full assurance that on that day we were welcomed. Knowing undeserved welcome makes one more ready to give it freely. I’m reminded of the hymn, “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” where we sing, “Down in a lowly manger, the humble Christ was born...” C.S. Lewis wrote, “To get even near humility, even for a moment, is like a drink of cold water to a (person) in a desert.” A cold water welcome waking us up. Not using our privilege as the

key to the kingdom but humility. So, we pray simply, that God be with us to see and be welcome for our neighbor.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and the people of God say, AMEN.