

[1] September 29, 2024

Sermon Title: The Proverbial Cup of Water

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

Theme: Reconciliation Sunday, reaching out to restore relationships

“For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” (v. 41) Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice ... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry? (Is. 58:6-7; Mt 25:35) ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

[2] You may have heard these words before in connection with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the “Proverbial Cup of Water.” In 1964, Charles H. Bayer, Jr. published a book through the Christian Board of Publication in St. Louis, Missouri, entitled *A Cup of Water*. The book was published as curriculum for use with Senior High Conferences in the 1960s; and I received a copy when I attended “Conference” in Enid, Oklahoma at Phillips Seminary as a youth. I have kept it all these years as a memory token, of how strong the image of “the cup of water” had become among Disciples of Christ. The last words of this book are:

“When you see human need, especially in those you have no reason to love, minister to it. A cup of water, a crust of bread—these acts of Christian kindness will do more than anything else to give meaning to the lives of our unfortunate neighbors.” p. 64

This symbol is proverbial because it has been used liberally in our denominational literature for decades. The symbol, the image, now refers to any act of hospitality and kindness and not just to a single cup of cold water. And, especially giving it in the name of Jesus, it is a significant act of love and service, not just a minor thing. The “proverbial cup of cold water” has taken on a larger meaning on the United States frontier, something akin to the 1947 hit song “Cool Water,” sung by the Sons of the Pioneers.

All day I face the barren waste without the taste of water. Cool water.

Old Dan and I with throats burned dry and souls that cry for water, Cool water. [Cool, clear, water.]

And, more recently, the 1976 song by Matt Maher, entitled “Come to the Water,” based on Isaiah 55:1-2

O Let all who thirst, let them come to the water. And let all who have nothing, let them come to the Lord. Without money, without price, Why should you pay the price? Except for the Lord. (Why spend money on that which is not bread, and your labor on that which does not satisfy?)

The biblical image of Jesus as “the fountain of living waters” comes to mind: Never again will they hunger, never will they thirst, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. He will lead them to springs, fountains, of living water. (Rev. 7:17); Jer 2:13; John 4:10)

So, the “Proverbial Cup of Water” has an expanded, spiritual, meaning which NOT ONLY transports us away from the world, with all its hunger and thirst, but then, it turns us around and sends us back into the world to serve, and to provide the cup of water to those in need. As Disciples, we are NOT just those who are called to witness to what has taken place in human history to redeem us, but we are ALSO ones who are SENT (John 9:7, 17:18, 20:21). We love others because God first loved us; and we love not just “in spirit” but also “in deed.” (1 John 3:13, 4:21). In the First Testament, the same Hebrew verb for hearing a command extends into also obeying the command; it extends worship beyond ritual into ethics. All in all, the “Proverbial Cup of Water” leads us past charity into social justice, BEYOND meeting the temporary needs of others INTO advocating for those “made poor” by social systems beyond their control.

[3] Karen Armstrong, in her popular book entitled *The Bible: A Biography* published in 2007. refers to the ancient religious word “*miqra*” as a summons to action and the practice of faith. This word is the basis for a term we use rather loosely today, the CALL. Not only is this term related to our vocational calling, but it extends in meaning beyond the biographical to the collaborative. “We are called to do, to be, to think . . .” The context for this term is the post-Temple period in Judaism when a changed group of Pharisees dared to apply a new form of exegesis to the scriptures. Our *miqra*, they said, is what calls us toward a common struggle for justice and the fullness of *Shalom*.

Paul Lehman, writing in 1963 in his book entitled *Ethics in a Christian Context*, that we are called “to make and keep human life human.” In this quote, he extends the definition of “human” beyond an anthropomorphic description into an ethical category. The word “human” expands from the context of being “merely human” into the context of being “fully human.”

Today is the Sunday that many will be walking together several miles in an annual Church World Service fundraising event called the CROP Hunger Walk. You are welcome to join those of us from FCC Midwest City at 2pm in the MWC Senior Center, if you are so inclined, to walk a few miles together to support the call to “End Hunger One Step at a Time.” This year the biblical theme is taken from Ecclesiastes 3:13 “It is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” We have a *miqra* that calls us to walk for those who cannot, for those who are hungry, those who are homeless, and those who need the proverbial cup of water.

Today is also the first of two Sundays we call Reconciliation Sunday, on which we receive our Special Reconciliation Offering. I have already sent in my donation. I encourage you to consider a donation as well. In Kansas, half of the funds stayed in the Kansas region to provide backpacks filled with food and drink to students in need in the Wichita area. A large part of these funds also go toward ending racism and reconciling people separated by historical levels of privilege and [4] prejudice. The writer, Ibram Kendi, suggests a way forward based on the Disciples legacy of Reconciliation, but extending it toward a new model for engagement, which he calls anti-racism. The anti-racist is one who not only takes a stand against racism, but actively works against it, not

only speaks against racism, but also acts to undo it. The model is based on Mark 9:24 “I believe, help my unbelief.” Some walk the walk even though they might be suspending their belief until they are more fully convinced. In the Celtic form of evangelism, friends of the faith are ones who go out to live among unbelievers in the hope that the way they live their lives will lead others to believe.

“For [Christ Jesus] is our peace ... who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... creating in himself one new humanity in place of the two (both far off and near, strangers and friends), thus making peace ... reconciling both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility through that peace.” (Eph. 2: 14-16).

“If anyone is in Christ, she or he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” Paul calls this the **ministry of reconciliation**; that we become a new humanity together acting in peace. (2 Cor. 5:17-18)

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This is an ancient proverb which suggests that parties that are normally opposed to one another can work together against a common foe. It’s an early form of what today we call intersectionality or working together for a common cause. Overcoming traditional boundaries that have kept us divided in the past, changing loyalties for the greater good. People of the 1960s used to sing a song called “We shall overcome.” You know the words, don’t you: ‘O deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day.’ It was an open call to find a deeper connection, ‘deep calling out to deep,’ for mutual respect and acceptance, for changing our relationships with God and with our neighbor, whether far away or near to hand.

[5] Biblically speaking, reconciliation is a gift of God. It is not something we can achieve on our own. The Greek word *katallagé* implies ‘mutual change,’ not unilateral change. It’s a change we do together, not apart. And the Greek verb “*lambánō*” translated as “receive” implies ‘a willing acceptance,’ not a reluctant one. It implies an initiative to go forward and receive the gift rather than hold back, making the giver walk the gift over to you and put it in your hand (all things being equal, assuming, of course, that the one receiving the gift is able to get up and walk). To receive this gift of reconciliation, one must want the gift, and desire what it has to offer us. To, literally, take hold the gift of reconciliation, both parties must want the change God desires for us. One party does not give reconciliation to another party, but God gives reconciliation to both parties.

[6] A popular saying of Jesus goes something like this: “whoever is not against us is for us.” Whoever does not gather with me/us scatters; whoever so much as gives you a cup of water in my name, because you are followers of the Messiah,” says Jesus, “certainly will not lose their reward.” Jesus’ reply comes in the context of someone who was driving out demons without being a part of their group, without being a part of the disciples. Someone, not a part of their group, was using the name of Jesus to drive out demons, to heal people, to work miracles, to build up people and the community, to work against the forces of evil in this world (Mk 9:38-41;

Mt. 12:30; Lk 9:50, 11:23). And Jesus is clear, ‘do not stop him, do not stop them.’ Allow them to continue. They are our friends, friends of the cause. These will never speak badly about me, about us, because to do so would mean that they would be criticizing their own actions.

We might call these friends of the cause ‘inverted enemies.’ Proverbs 16:7 declares that ‘when a man’s ways please God, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.’ In other words, when we live a life that pleases God, when we live a life that imitates the way of Christ, we make friends of our enemies. Animosity is turned upside down. A hatred bent on inflicting harm becomes a love bent on bringing peace. The hard-hearted reverse course and become soft-hearted. Those who have hardened their hearts to the suffering of others are called out: ‘Circumcise the foreskin of your heart and no longer be stiff-necked (Dt. 10:16).’ Paul asks us, in his Letter to the Romans, to remember that we were once enemies of God (Rm. 5:10), but no longer. God has shown ‘his love for us, for while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ The Gospel of John re-iterates this in the words of Jesus: ‘No longer do I call you servants, for servants do not understand what the master is doing, but I have called you friends,’ precisely because you do know (Jn. 15:15).

“For if, when we were enemies of God, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! Not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received (lambánō – willfully accepts with initiative) reconciliation (katallagé – mutual change, at-one-ment, restoration to favor with God) .” (Romans 5:10-11).

As a child, when I first read the verses in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, I remember encountering this long word (multi-syllable) “reconciliation” and asking my teacher what it meant. This long word stood out from the rest of my memory scriptures like a sore thumb. And especially since these verses described a “ministry of reconciliation,” or a “message of reconciliation,” I needed more clarity. What is Paul talking about? The word sounded strange to me, it did not seem to rhyme with the rest of the passages. “Be reconciled to God,” Paul says. And, I in my lack of clarity, would say, “I didn’t know we were not reconciled.” As a teenager, I would read the same verses in the Good News Bible, the paraphrase, where the translation was “friendship,” rather than “reconciliation.” For a while, this satisfied me. Until I was old enough to read the theology of Paul Tillich, where he describes this reconciliation as process of mutual acceptance of ourselves, and others, another way of describing “salvation,” or “wholeness.”

There was another long word I stumbled over as a child, the word “participation.” “Is not the cup of blessing that we bless a participation in the blood of Christ, the bread that we break, a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). I asked the same questions about this word. The Good News Bible translated it as “a sharing,” in the body and blood (life) of Christ. The Greek word is *koinonia*, meaning community, partnership, fellowship. In other words, our *koinonia* is that which is shared in common (values, language, culture), an intimate bond of knowing each other which unites us. From Paul’s perspective, this means having the mind of Christ (Rom. 12:2), the same mind and same love (Phil. 2:2 - full accord), agreeing with each

other, with no divisions among you (1 Cor. 1:10), standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). But we should not assume that Paul is asking us to assimilate into one culture, in lockstep one with the other. In sharing the Lord's supper, the one loaf and one cup, through the Holy Spirit, there is an implied transformation (translation, exegesis) of the elements which accepts lived diversity, rather than smoothing it over, or whitewashing it (Col. 1:13; Matt: 23:27), by accepting individual differences within the larger overarching framework of love. As my pastor care professor used to say, 'we are all the same, yet we are all different.' Koinonia, the spiritual fellowship, is based on the intersectionality of the Gospel, not on cultural or ethnic sameness. No matter what our background there is always room at the foot of the cross.

The author of First John puts a particular spin on this: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us (and this fellowship is with God and with the Son (Jesus Christ), which makes joy complete." (1 John 1:3). When we share the language and images of faith, one with the other, we are building a common participation, a common sharing, a common parlance, a common way of behaving, which attracts others to the same faith. This koinonia, this participation, this sharing, weaves a common thread throughout our diversity, a common unity beyond our differences. We do not like to think of God as changing, but in this kind of reconciliation, God does change—God sets aside God's complaints against us. (Another way of saying, they are nailed to the theological cross.) It is an agreed upon mutual change that results in a restoring of relationships, both divine and human.

Reconciliation is such a divine gift! God's Justice is tempered by God's mercy. And the result is that God changes God's self, as is shown by the words from the Prophet Hosea: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger ... for I am God and no mortal, I am the Holy One in your midst and I will not come in wrath." (Hosea 11:8-9) If God were mortal, we would have no chance whatsoever, no grace whatsoever. But God is not mortal, and precisely because God is Holy, God has mercy and God changes God's judgment. If You, O Lord, kept track of iniquities, then who, O Lord, could stand? (Ps. 130:3). Or as Paul declares, 'love does not keep a list of wrongs.' The gift of reconciliation is not a human gift (as the world gives), but a divine gift of indescribable peace which transforms everyone who receives it, who takes a hold on it, and does not let go.

The first Testament describes 'reconciliation,' in one source, as forgiveness (Dan. 9:24 *kaphar*). The Hebrew word carries the modern connotation "to cover over as with bitumen," with bitumen being an ancient type of liquid asphalt where stones and sands are bound together to form a covering for the ancient road. The road of reconciliation is paved over by the liberating love of God. "No longer," says Jesus, "do I call you servants, but I have called you friends." (Jn 15:15). Friendship, reconciliation, those mutually changed forever through God's love. Alleluia! Amen.

