

The Needs of the "Little Ones"

Today's gospel reading as assigned by the lectionary is only 3 verses long, found at the end of Matthew's gospel, chapter 10. However, when I read those 3 verses earlier this week, I was a bit confused. To whom were they addressed? To what prophet is Jesus referring? And who are the "little ones?" So I offer to you today the context of these three verses, which begins with the conclusion of chapter 9 and includes one verse of chapter 11.

(Matthew 9:35-10:1; 10:40 - 11:1, NRSV)

When reading the Bible, context is important, on multiple levels. The most obvious context is the literary context, which has concentric circles. Where do these verses fit into the words around them? And into the book of which they are a part? And into the Bible as a whole? Snatching words out of context is an unreliable way to read the Bible.

A second form of context is the historical context. What was the religious, cultural, sociological, political, and historical context in which these words were first spoken? And what was going on when this book of the Bible was written, which was probably at a later date than the words were spoken? The original context sheds light on the meaning of a text.

A third form of context is the context of those who hear the scripture. Today's context. How does our experience in the world color our understanding? What questions are we asking which might be answered by a text? And how might a text provoke us to see our world with new eyes?

This last question is what makes the Bible a living, breathing, challenging Word of God, much more than just an interesting historical document we can study. When we pray that God will speak to us through scripture, we are praying to be challenged--and changed--by the Word of God.

It would be easy to look at the 3 central verses of our text today and not feel much challenge. In fact, it would be easy to feel pretty good about ourselves based on these three verses, isolated from their many contexts. Like many churches, we have grown in our awareness of the importance of hospitality in the last few years. We know how to welcome people. We do it pretty well, we think. We are a compassionate people, too, who give "cups of cold water" to those in need in our community. We get it. Jesus wants us to be hospitable, and for the most part, we are hospitable. We're a friendly church.

But these words aren't actually addressed to 21st century churches seeking to grow their membership. Instead, they are part of a longer set of guidelines for Jesus' disciples as they were being sent on a mission. They come at the end of warnings about traveling light, expecting to be rejected, preparing for persecution, and choosing Christ and his cross even over family. Hard words. Uncomfortable words. So these final verses promising rewards feel like something of a reward themselves. Hey, just remember who you represent, and notice the folks who welcome you. They are welcoming Christ when they welcome you, and vice versa. All your troubles will be worth it in the end, when you receive your reward.

These words are addressed to us only if we understand that we, too, are sent out on a mission. They don't speak deeply to church signage, or greeting teams, or coffee hours, as important as those things might be. Instead, these are words about Christ's mission, and our mission, being sent, and being received when we are sent. In the context of Matthew's gospel, they are part of the great theme that the church is to go out into the world in Christ's name, for the sake of the "little ones," to represent

Christ to those in need and at the same time to encounter Christ in the stranger. Pastor Pam Driesel calls this the "miracle of hospitality," that in giving we receive, in receiving we give, that we meet Christ in one another, and that we are Christs to each other. (Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol. 1, p. 280, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2013) "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," says Jesus, "and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." It sounds like something from the Gospel of John, but in the context of Matthew's gospel, these words resonate with Jesus' words in the parable of the sheep and the goats: "Whenever you did this for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it for me."

The context of this missionary-sending advice reminds us why Jesus sent out his disciples. He was traveling around the cities and villages, teaching and preaching, but that wasn't enough. The people he saw were sick. They lacked direction. They were harassed, and helpless in a cruel political environment. Jesus sent his disciples out with his power and authority because he couldn't keep up with all the needs all by himself. He still sends us out, to cast out whatever unclean spirits abide in our world today, to cure every disease and sickness of every sort, even when all we can do is offer a cup of cold water in his name.

For Jesus is concerned about the "little ones," not the big ones. He has compassion for the poor. His mission is to the oppressed. He cares about the powerless, the overlooked, the hungry, and the needy, orphans and widows and strangers, and he calls them all "the little ones."

What a different perspective this is from the one we hear so loudly in our world today, where we clamor to notice everything that celebrities do and say, where we are fixated on every word that the powerful tweet, where we scorn those on the bottom of the social ladder and do everything we can not to be associated with "those people." These words of Jesus should make us squirm.

Theology professor Anna Case-Winters writes about a squirming moment she experienced. She was part of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s delegation to the World Communion of Reformed Churches meeting in Accra, Ghana, in 2004. As part of their time in West Africa, the host church took delegates to see the giant fortresses on the coast built by European traders in the 17th and 18th centuries. Under the castles were cargo holds, where goods were stored until the ships came in to be loaded up. At first, what was traded were the region's gold and mahogany for sugar, spices, silk, and woven cloth. But a more lucrative trade developed, the sale of human beings. As many as 1000 people were held in the cargo holds-turned-dungeons under the castle, with the doors locked until the slave ships arrived. This could be a period of up to three months, during which food was sent down a chute from a window above. The doors were not opened, even when some of the captives died. When the ships pulled into the harbor, the chains and padlocks were removed from the doors so that the human cargo could pass through what came to be known as the "gate of no return," their last steps on their native continent.

Seeing these castles and their dungeons was a sobering reminder of the brutality of slave trading history for the delegates. The tour next went to the upper levels of one of the castles. Just above the cargo hold was a light and airy room with big windows. "What was in this place?" someone asked. The guide answered, "This room was the sanctuary where people worshiped."

A gasp went through the delegation. The hypocrisy was appalling. Worshiping in a room above a torture chamber. This was a stain on Christianity. How could those people who were profiting from the slave trade not make the connection between faith and life? How could they not hear the cries from below, and end this injustice and human misery?

But their righteous indignation turned a corner when someone in the delegation asked another question. "Where are we not making the connection between faith and life? Where are we not hearing

the cries from below?" (Case-Winters, Anna, 2015, Matthew, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 162-3)

Are we squirming yet? Has this text found its way into our context, to challenge and change us?

Surely there are cries from below that we too are ignoring. Are they coming from those in our community who are homeless, perhaps due to high housing costs, or maybe because of a medical crisis that meant the loss of a job? Perhaps because of mental illness or addiction or any number of other contributors to insecure housing. Last year, six people in Bozeman died homeless. Were we paying attention? What needs to change? How can we respond in the name of Christ?

Or maybe the cries from below we are ignoring come from farther away. In March, the United Nations warned that the combination of drought and conflict in four nations threatened the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II. Twenty million lives are at risk in Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen, lives which may be lost to hunger or disease due to famine this year. The warnings were sounded, with pleas for aid for this preventable crisis. How much have we heard about this since? It's not because the aid is rolling in and the problem has been solved. Later this year, we might hear the death tolls. I hope if we do, we will be squirming. What would Jesus do?

No doubt there are others crying from below-refugees growing up in camps for displaced persons, people caught in the modern form of slavery called human trafficking, or people afraid of losing their access to health care. These are the "little ones" about whom Jesus cares, for whom he sends his disciples into the world. And each of us can also find ourselves in the category of "little ones." In the context of Matthew's gospel, return for a moment to the beginning of chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount. Each of the "blessed are" statements, what are known as the Beatitudes, lifts up those who are recipients of Christ's mission. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted." The "little ones" are not "others," so different from the rest of us. For blessed are any of us when we are poor, in mourning, merciful, or meek. This is the context which explains the reward Jesus describes when he says in today's scripture, "truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

So what is this "reward?" Is it the final reward of welcome into God's eternal kingdom when our days on earth are ended? Yes, that is part of the reward. But Jesus' mission is for life on earth now. He doesn't tell us to give a cup of cold water to the little ones upon arrival in heaven. He sends his disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, and proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven to the needy of his day. And he still sends us out with a similar mission into our world today. The reward we receive begins as soon as we start to obey him. It is the reward of living close to God, of living in God's purposes, not our own, the joy of knowing God's love and seeing God's justice now. The kingdom, preaches Jesus, has come near. We can hear God's welcome, "Well done, good and faithful servant," here, now, in this life.

We hear it when we come to the table of grace, the communion table which provides something greater than cold water, the gift of Christ himself. We come not because we have earned a place, not because we are good or righteous, but because we are little ones in need of sustenance, in need of welcome. We come because Jesus invites us, and at the table, host and guest are one. At the table, we are united with God.

So come, little ones, receive your welcome. Look around at all the other little ones who also admit their needs, who, like you, are little Christs. And trust that Christ will be enough. For Christ himself will be our reward.