

James 2:14-17

Matthew 10:40-42

June 28, 2010

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LIKE SEEING THE FACE OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Fifteen years ago next Sunday, on Tuesday, July 5, 2005, Duplin Christian Outreach Ministries opened for business. After two years of hard work and planning by a representative steering committee, the crisis center was dedicated on a hot Sunday afternoon, June 3, 2005 and began work a month later. The founders of the crisis center dreamed that one day the ministry would expand to include an Executive Director and a Thrift Store that would serve the community and help fund the financial assistance of Duplin County neighbors in crisis. Over the last fifteen years, those dreams came true in the person of Jeralene Merritt and in the Blessings in Store just down the street on W. Main Street. Since 2005, DCOM has helped hundreds of people with emergencies due to unexpected illness, unemployment, medical bills, homelessness, and natural disasters.

When DCOM was formed, the original steering committee members deliberately named it Duplin *Christian* Outreach Ministries, even though we knew that might disqualify us from receiving some much-needed grant money. We agreed that “Christ” is the reason the ministry was founded. Two of the founding principles were, and remain, that (1) every person who walks through the door at 514 S. Norwood Street in Wallace will be treated with the utmost respect and (2) DCOM will do everything possible to assist the person in his or her need. Although we didn’t officially adopt it as a scriptural basis for the ministry, Matthew 10:42 sums up the purpose and character of the ongoing crisis ministry: “and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Typically, when Matthew uses the term “little ones” in his gospel, he means children, such as when Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me . . . for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Matthew 19:14) In that spirit, “little ones” represent the people who are in no position to pay you back for a cup of cold water. They are the marginalized, the vulnerable, the most needy, the people who have a need that you can fill. Jesus’ guiding principle, his challenge to us if you will, is if we’re willing to recognize that it is in the very act itself that we get the reward. Otherwise, we might well be like the ones Jesus spoke against in his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:32-36)

These three verses from Matthew 10 are part of Jesus' instructions and warnings to his disciples when he sent them out on their mission trip. "This is what you can expect," Jesus told them. The words about being welcomed and offered a cup of cold water are the positive response to his earlier heads-up about the rejection they can expect because of what they say and do in his name.

But the principle behind the "welcome" and "cup of cold water" is important for us to hear as people who claim to be disciples and followers of Jesus and who sometimes, as we said in today's Opening Sentences, "sit and wonder if there is any way we can be of help." A few weeks ago we heard the story of the Great Commission from the end of Matthew's gospel, with that majestic call, "Go into all the world . . ." If we're intimidated by the enormity of that commission, then today's story should, on the one hand, give us hope and, on the other, challenge us to our core.

At some point in the past, I started receiving emails from a group called "Radio Free Babylon." The emails include a cartoon series called "Coffee with Jesus." Each cartoon has four panels that alternate between a person and Jesus enjoying cups of coffee and discussing some idea or question or action. This past week one called "Whatever Small Ways" showed up in my inbox. Bill is going to put it on the screen now.



In case you can't make out what it says, James says, "Thank you in advance, Jesus, for whatever small ways I can make a difference for you today." Jesus replies, "James! You pray with confidence and faith. Bless you, my friend! One thing, though." James asks, "Yes, Lord?" Jesus says, "Ain't nothing 'small' about what I'm gonna do through you today."

I doubt you can read the fine print under the cartoon, but it sums up well the message about offering a cup of cold water: "It could be the tiniest of encounters, but if you're tuned into the Lord, you could reap huge rewards in his kingdom. You might think it small, but if you're tuned in, it'll be groundbreaking for someone. It'll seem miniscule in the moment until God shows you . . . THIS, right now, this moment, is where it all comes down. You're about to show someone the Kingdom of God. Recognize how he's using you right now. Don't think small. He's got big plans for you."

Don't forget, though, what else Jesus had to say about helping folks – "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" In her book *Dakota*, Kathleen Norris shares a story that apparently originated in Russian Orthodox monastery. An older monk was talking with a younger, new monk, and said, "I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, 'Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?'"¹

Years ago I read a similar story told by a seminary intern who was working at a downtown Catholic soup kitchen. It had been a long, tiring, demanding Saturday night, but closing time had finally arrived. He and the priest were shutting the door when they saw a down-and-out man shuffling toward them. Worn out and ready to go home, the seminary student inadvertently muttered under his breath, "Oh, Jesus Christ!" To which the priest softly responded, "Could be, could be!" as he swung the door open wide.

We know from our own experience how true Jesus' words are, that it's easy and even natural to do good to those who do good back to us. A more cynical version might be, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." But what's wrong with expecting a "Thank you" when you do something nice for someone? Well, nothing really. But if expecting something in return – even a simple "Thank you" -- is your main motivation and reason for helping someone in need, then that action seems to fall short of what Jesus is talking about in giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty.

In something of a commentary on these gospel verses, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome about what it means to live in Christian community and to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Paul was obviously aware of human nature when he wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21) Perhaps the evil that is overcome by doing good is not just what your enemies are

doing to you. Perhaps the evil that is overcome by doing the right thing results in our reward. One writer puts it this way: “If we look into our anger, our pain, our worst, most unholy experiences, if we look into the dark side of our own soul, we might see what divine forgiveness looks like, what unconditional love looks like, and see, in the most unlikely places, the face of God.”²

An ancient Jewish midrash or commentary on a biblical law about helping others comes in the form of a story from Rabbi Alexander. “Two donkey drivers were walking by the way and they hated each other. One of their donkeys sat down. The second driver saw it, but kept going. Then, after having passed, this second driver thought: ‘It is written in the Torah, “If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall surely lift it up.” Immediately the second driver returned and helped the first to raise the donkey. The first driver then began to think, ‘So-and-so is thus my friend, and I did not even know it.’ Both entered an inn and ate and drank together.”³

Today’s sermon title was inspired by some scenes from the musical *Les Misérables*. The protagonist, Jean Valjean, thinks he is doomed to roam this world as a convicted felon, because he had been in prison after stealing bread to feed his hungry child. Indeed, when he is let out of prison, no one will take him in or tend to his needs. Finally, he knocks on the door of a church whose priest is named, fittingly, Monsieur Bienvenue (or “Welcome!” – see Matthew 10:40 – “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”)

The priest offers Valjean a meal of bread and wine and says, “There is wine here to revive you. There is bread to make you strong. There’s a bed to rest till morning. Rest from pain and rest from wrong.” Valjean is amazed at the priest’s welcome and ministry and says, “You are good; you don’t despise me. You take me into your house; you light your candles for me, and I haven’t hid from you where I come from, and how miserable I am.”

Monsieur Bienvenue gently responds to Valjean, “You need not tell me who you are. This is not my house; it is the house of Christ. It does not ask any comer whether he has a name, but whether he has an affliction. You are suffering; you are hungry and thirsty; be welcome. Your name is my brother.” At the end of the story, as Valjean dies asking God to forgive his trespasses and take him to God’s glory, he walks toward the candlelight and sings, “And remember the truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God.”

That final line hearkens back to the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob, who tricked and cheated his brother so many times, ran for his life. After many, many years, they are reunited on the day after Jacob wrestles through the night with the angel of God. When he wakes up the next morning, and in response to God’s blessing, Jacob says, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” Later that day, Jacob nervously approaches the reunion with his brother, burdened down with gifts (bribes?), but Esau runs to meet his “enemy” brother, hugs his neck, and kisses him. When Esau refuses Jacob’s gifts (not out of spite, but because it seems seeing his brother is gift enough), Jacob emotionally responds, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like

seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor.” (Genesis 32:30; 33:10-11)

People of God, when we see someone in need, no matter who it is, and we have the opportunity to meet that need:

Will we look at that person and see the face of Christ?

And, maybe more important than that, will we welcome that person?

And, for both of us, will it be like seeing the face of God?

Let us pray: Dear God, open our eyes to those around us who need a cold cup of water and kindle our hearts to respond to them in love and action. In Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Taken from Debra Dean Murphy, “Oh, Jesus Christ, Is It You Again?” June 25, 2014 at www.ekklesiaproject.org.

²Lucia Lloyd, “For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God,” July 27, 2014 at www.gaychurch.org.

³From “Seeing God’s Face: Jacob & Esau,” at www.beki.org.