

The Kindness of Strangers

Matthew 10:40-42

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 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.”

“I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” That’s Blanche DuBois’s memorable line in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but it applies, oddly enough, to today’s Gospel, where Jesus calls us to kindness and hospitality.

The reading from Matthew summons us to hospitality. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” Jesus tells us, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” St. Benedict emphasized hospitality in his prescriptions for the monastic life. “Let everyone who comes be received as Christ,” he wrote into his monastic rule, and Benedictine monasteries to this day are places of refuge for the weary traveler, the poor, or the spiritual seeker. “Let everyone who comes be received as Christ.”

It's not easy being the new kid on the block. I'm sure all of us can remember times when we found ourselves in unfamiliar surroundings, when we didn't know what to do or how to behave, when we searched the crowd desperately for a friendly face, even a smile. Or how about navigating your way alone through the cafeteria line in junior-high school and then facing a vast room full of tables, not knowing where to sit?

Being hospitable is not always easy; it requires that we step outside of ourselves and think of others. Jesus in today's Gospel enjoins us to welcome his followers: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." St. Peter writes, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling," and, in fact, the entire New Testament contains instructions to be hospitable both to those who proclaim the gospel, but also to the stranger. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," the writer of Hebrews tell us, "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."¹

But the Gospel passage also suggests that hospitality is not all that demanding. A cup of cold water, Jesus says, is gesture enough. A cup of cold water. Or maybe a smile. A kind word. Or the offer of a place to sit, a chance to rest weary legs.

As I was preparing this sermon, I remembered various times in my life when I was desperate for a friend or some gesture of hospitality, however small – and how grateful I was when someone came through. One of the toughest adjustments for a kid is moving to a new town and starting a new school. I did that fairly often as a child, and I believe that, looking back, it was a good thing; it made me more resilient, more independent than I might have been otherwise. But it was no fun at the time, facing down a lunchroom full of unfamiliar faces.

¹ 1 Peter 4:9 (NIV); Hebrews 13:2 (ESV).

I remember also the time between my first and second years of college when I reported to work at a loading dock, working alongside of Teamsters. One of my tasks, it turned out, was climbing into a semi-tractor and jockeying forty-five-foot trailers around the yard – and this, of course, without any prior notice or instruction. I was expected simply to do it.

One of the Teamsters took pity on me and showed me the ropes, how to back a forty-five-foot trailer into the aperture of a loading dock. A cup of cold water. The kindness of strangers.

No one has taught me more about hospitality than my lovely wife, who also happens to be our assisting priest here at Christ Church. I tend more often than not to live inside my head and to be very task-oriented. So when I go into a supermarket or a post office, too often I see only a functionary at the cash register or behind the counter – someone who takes my money or rings up a debit transaction. Catharine, on the other hand, sees a human being, a child of God. She engages that person in conversation and might say something like, “That’s a lovely scarf,” or, “You look sad. Are you all right?”

One morning, we headed to a diner for breakfast. The locals were all seated at the counter trading stories and telling lies as they did every morning. In walked an elderly gentleman dressed in a cardigan sweater and a necktie. The tie had seen better days, and, this being a weekday, he was the only person in the diner wearing a tie. He was alone, and he clearly looked out of place. “That’s a lovely tie!” Catharine said. And the man’s face lit up. “Well, you know,” he said proudly, “I like to make an effort. I want to look good when I go out.”

A cup of cold water. The kindness of strangers.

And if someone is rude or grumpy, watch out! Catharine takes that as a challenge and assumes, usually correctly, that the person is acting out of

some interior pain. For months during our daily jog on Minortown Road in Woodbury, for instance, we encountered a neighbor taking her morning walk. Every day, Catharine would say “Good morning!” very brightly, and for a very long time there was no response, just a scowl.

I thought the cause was hopeless, but my wife wouldn’t let up. Every day she’d chirp, “Good morning!” Nothing in return, and after we passed her quarry she’d say, “Don’t worry, she’ll come around.” Every day: “Good morning!” Nothing. “Good morning!” And then, one day, a grunt. And one thing led to another. Sharon, our neighbor, invited us to dinner not long ago.

A cup of cold water. The kindness of strangers. And what is the return? “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward,” Jesus promises; “and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.” The summons to hospitality, in other words, is global. We direct acts of kindness not merely toward Jesus or to his disciples – or to our inner circle of friends – but to everyone, in part because the gospel itself, the “good news,” is offered to everyone. Jesus calls all people to himself. And Jesus promises that if we offer a cup of cold water to anyone, to the little ones, it will be accounted to us as if we had given it to Jesus himself.

Stepping outside of yourself and offering hospitality to others may be difficult at times, but it carries the advantage of perspective. When we hear another’s sorrows or feel someone else’s pain, our own troubles don’t seem quite so intractable.

But, as Catharine will be the first to tell you, there’s still another benefit from stepping outside yourself and offering hospitality to others. People tell you the most amazing things, and the most improbable friendships have been forged. The kindness of strangers.

And I wonder, finally, if Jesus' summons to hospitality applies here at Christ Church. Some of you, I'm sure, can remember the first time you visited here. Perhaps you came with a friend or at the behest of your parents. But maybe you came alone, and that's not easy. I'd like to think that someone said hello, flashed a warm smile, and welcomed you, for that is what Jesus asks of us. A cup of cold water – or a mug of hot coffee. Stepping outside of ourselves and seeing another. In the words of St. Benedict, "Let everyone who comes be received as Christ."

Everyone. The gospel, the "good news," is no respecter of persons. Jesus opens his arms to everyone, and he asks that we do the same to others.

In the words of St. Benedict, "Let everyone who comes be received as Christ." May it always be so among the people of God here at Christ Church.

Second Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut