

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Online Worship Service
June 28, 2020

Beloved, grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and from our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every Wednesday, for over 20 years, I've gathered with pastor, deacon and seminarian colleagues for pericope Bible study. A group, that over the years, has fluctuated in size from 3 to over 20 people; each of us mining with the others, the truth of the scriptures for the preaching task. That group has been my touchstone since I was a seminary intern myself. They are a community of faith for me, and for one who is nomadic in my church attendance, they become church for me.

When we gathered this last Wednesday by Zoom, as we have now for over three months, there was a palpable sense of heaviness. Your pastors, deacons and seminarians are not unlike you and me: exhausted from discerning ways to exercise their ministries in the midst of pandemic, social distancing and quarantine; overwhelmed by the steep learning curves of taking what is familiar and comforting online, recreating and reshaping experiences of what it means to be a community in Christ. I know that I feel a sense of insufficiency as a preacher and teacher trying to be a public witness to the truth of the gospel while preaching to a largely empty room in front of a little opaque dot on a camera.

As folks were working through the nuances of these short verses, wondering what it means to be a prophet or to discern a prophet in this day and age, whether or not a cup of water is a metaphor – and for what, my contribution to the conversation was whether or not the gospel was more simple – perhaps, we might trust it on its face, a beautiful, accessible to all challenge from Jesus that we should care for one another. Sometimes a cup of water is just that, a cup of water.

In that bible study, I met colleagues and friends who sat with me in my exhaustion, and met me, gently, challenging me to go deeper. Because, there is a danger in hearing the words of this week's gospel and giving ourselves a pass, a churchy gold star, and believe that because we feed others faithfully, welcome others consistently or give of ourselves generously that we're done, we've mastered discipleship, we've claimed some sort of prize and, in so doing, have reduced the gospel to the well-intentioned handing out of water bottles on a hot day.

But the longer I sit with today's gospel, it's not that simple. The instruction Jesus gives the disciples is not about *extending* welcome, it's about *receiving* welcome. Jesus is teaching us what it looks like and feels like to be welcomed in Jesus' name. More specifically, what are the risks and rewards of extending hospitality to prophets who come among us – or sometimes are us.

Looking at the gospel through the eyes of our first reading from Jeremiah, we meet a people who are facing the precise conundrum Jesus references. Jerusalem is in ruins, its leadership has been decimated, and the small band of faithful people who've stayed and tended the city long for the pandemic to be over, for their city to be restored freedom and glory. They long for good news. Enter then, the prophet Hananiah, who comes and announces that the time of exile is over. Glad news, he says, everything that people have lost is about to be restored – we're going to get back

to normal, the way it used to be; indeed, God is bringing a quick and easy deliverance, and the time has come for celebration .

This is exactly the message that people want to hear. The hard times are over! There is no more struggle to be had! God is going to fix everything! Hananiah is received as a hero, dispensing comfort, reassurance – and not a little bit of triumph in the face of significant and challenging loss. He offers an easy victory to burdened and tired people, not unlike a bishop who might say to a table of colleagues, sometimes, a cup of cold water is just that, only that, a cup of water.

The only problem is it's not a message from God. Indeed, the message from God comes through Jeremiah. Jeremiah condemns Hananiah's prophecy as false and dangerous, and then slowly, thoughtfully and reverently dismantles its offer of cheap comfort and false hope for God's people. Real peace is hard fought, and God's favor is not some sort of carnival prize. No, Jeremiah puts something of himself on the line, reminding Hananiah and the people that real prophets tell God's hard and holy truths. Hard truths about the need for repentance and return. Hard truths about the high cost of justice. Hard truths about patience, long suffering, and sacrifice. Indeed, God's people will have to wait, and pray, and surrender, and repent. There's no short-cut, we have hard work to do – on ourselves, in our communities, and for the sake of the world.

Jesus's take on welcome means something entirely different when we think of how easy it is to welcome the smooth talking Hananiah's and the challenges of receiving the provocative and truth-telling Jeremiah, speaking truth no one wants to hear. What if no one offers him a cup of cold water when he's done prophesying? Or worse still, what if "people will leave," if we claim such truths as our own?

Beloved, we are meant to minister from the margins – not from the comfort of a cozy center. In these beautifully short and simple verses, Jesus is toppling institutional and cultural power and pushing the church out of stained glass fortresses and back into the places of greatest need in the communities we serve. The hard truth is that we are accustomed to being the privileged ones, who benevolently extend welcome, generosity, charity, and hospitality to others less privileged than ourselves; and Jesus is reminding us that it isn't about what "we" do for "them," but in fact, what God has done for us, all of us, beloved all in the sight and heart of God.

In Jesus' sending of the disciples into the world to share the good news of God's reign, he sent them out as vulnerable outsiders. They had no religious institutions to back their efforts, no political tools to wield, no cultural capital to dispense. They had no power at all, save the power of the Holy Spirit. How did Jesus tell them? Carry nothing, no money, no food, no extra clothes. Depend wholly on the hospitality of the people God sends you to serve. Even the simplest, most basic of their needs, the need for a cup of cold water on a sun scorched afternoon, would have to be met by others.

Jesus calls us to minister from the margins. The power of our witness flows from humility and vulnerability, not from complacency and comfort. Good news is preached from a place unencumbered and untainted by the temptations and corruptions of human power. The message of God's saving love comes from dependent outsiders, from the edges of society, not from the center.

Jesus has not commissioned us to say whatever is trendy or comfortable or easy or popular. Jesus has commissioned us to say what is true. False hope is not God's hope. Easy peace is not God's peace. Convenient justice is not God's justice.

Perhaps what we need to learn is the art of receiving welcome before we can extend it honestly in Christ's name. Indeed, those who are recipients of our charity, God means to be our teachers.

Beloved, whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of the prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Not everyone will often open the door to you, many will turn away from the challenging truth of the gospel, and the offer of a glass of cold water to renew and revive might be elusive; but that doesn't excuse our inaction. The gospel is clear, go. The gospel is clear, speak. The gospel is clear, do so with reverence, gentleness, humility, truthfulness, and above all things love.

Yes, there is great risk involved. Of course, there is. But there is also reward.

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This sermon was shaped by the work of Debie Thomas, in her essay, "Welcome the Prophet," in the weekly webzine, Journey with Jesus.