

## Unlikely Missionaries

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Matthew 10:40-42

“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 read this week about a theologian who was researching a book and found herself one Sunday at the doors of a Presbyterian church in Ireland. She noticed 2 women at the doors of the church, greeting worshipers as they walked in. They asked each person his or her first name. Now doesn’t that sound welcoming? Not only were they greeting people, they were making an effort to learn their names. But wait...upon hearing each one’s name, they drew conclusions about the person. The people with protestant sounding names were welcomed warmly and shown to their seats. The people who had Catholic sounding names like Patrick and Catherine were told they were in the wrong church and sent on their way.

This probably happened a long time ago, right? No. As of the printing of the book I was reading this week, copyrighted in 2011, this is a current practice. This church truly turns people away at the door based on whether their names sound “right.” From our point of view, this practice is not acceptable, is it? We would never quiz people at the door and tell them they can’t come in, right? Definitely not. But how do we engage in gate keeping of our own?

I was at a clergy meeting a month or so ago where one of the ministers present at the meeting referred to himself as the gatekeeper of the church. He meant that he is the one who ultimately decides what is right and what is wrong from an ideological and theological perspective. He decides who can join the church and who can hold which positions of leadership...in other words, who is in and who is out. I thought to myself, "My God, he must be exhausted." And what an awful job...keeping people out of the church. Honestly, I prefer how I understand my job, figuring out ways to include and welcome more people. It's a lot more fun! And make no mistake about it...there is a cost to the kinds of exclusive behavior churches have tolerated and perpetuated for far too long. There are exhausted gatekeepers and many, many people who have grown weary of organized religion, who have given up on a God who is represented as exclusive, "for" some people and "against" others.

In just a few sentences, our text today challenges us to think about what it means to welcome one another, how we are affected by our own attempts at genuine hospitality, and how all of this connects with God's welcome of us. These verses are at the very end of this missionary discourse we have been studying the last few weeks. We've reflected on the job of being a disciple, it's challenges, the potential dangers, moments of doubt and rejection. And today we wonder about how we are called to treat God's messengers. We overhear Matthew's interpretation of Jesus' proclamation and promise that if we "welcome" these representatives of his (the prophet, the righteous person, and the little ones), we will share in their rewards.

This causes me to ask 2 questions:

In our world today, who are these representatives?

And, what is their reward in which we might share?

Let's begin with the first question, who represents the ways of Jesus, who carries his message to us today?

Certainly, some likely answers might be people like Rev. Dr. William Barber, whom I've talked about before. He is a Disciples minister who is using his voice and spending his time organizing people around issues of justice for the most vulnerable in our nation. And I think about Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama whose book, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, is the topic of study in the Modern Lit class right now. In the book, the Dalai Lama says this, "There's a Tibetan saying: Wherever you have friends that's your country, and wherever you receive love, that's your home." That sounds pretty much like Jesus' message.

So, these are famous people who seem to be sharing Jesus' message with the world. But what about right here in our own lives? Who have you encountered lately that left you with a better understanding of who Jesus was or what God is really like?

I spent some time this week thinking about this question for myself. Who has revealed Jesus' ways to me lately? I've told you before about the time I spend each week with the women from the Inside Out program. This program provides housing and services to women who have been incarcerated. They live together in a house where they share chores and meals and where they learn how to make good choices, stay clean and sober, and do the things that will move them forward and keep them out of trouble.

When I was asked to be involved with Inside Out, I was initially asked to lead a Bible study for the women. However, I was uncomfortable with leading a Bible study in a time slot that required the women to be present. I don't think anyone should be required to listen to anything I, or anyone else, has to say about God. I told Denise, the director, I

would love to spend time with the women and talk about whatever they wanted to talk about, including faith, but I wanted them to direct the conversation. And I don't know if she was desperate or what, but she said ok.

Most weeks, the conversation starts with what they have been dealing with in court or at work, or with their families. I am convinced the idea of a "fresh start" or "second chance" for people who have been incarcerated is a myth. The things these women have to do in order to comply with the judge's orders would paralyze me. They are so brave. Our conversations always turn to how they cope with the stress they have and the answer is always God, or more generally, believing there is something bigger than what's going on in the present and desperately wanting that "something bigger" for their lives. These women show me the ways of Jesus every week because they never fail to ask me how my week is going and what my sermon is going to be about on Sunday.

In the midst of lives that I cannot even imagine navigating, they have compassion for me. When I have been homesick, they have reminded me that home is, as the Dalai Lama wrote, where one receives love and I am loved here. When my sermon just doesn't seem to want to be written, they brainstorm how they see the scripture and what it might mean from their point of view. And perhaps most importantly, they remind me that there is always something to laugh about. Most recently, there was a story of a snake on top of their refrigerator. One of the women saw it and thought it was a joke...a rubber snake, so she went to get it down. My, was she surprised when she reached for it and it moved!

Sometimes we forget that the people we are trying to help, the people we are sharing God's with, are sharing that same love with us. The world is full of unlikely missionaries and our faith tradition calls us to

welcome every single one of them, not only into our church, but into our lives. But honestly, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, we have a very different idea of hospitality than the writers in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Hospitality from a Christian perspective is about welcoming strangers...people we don't know, people who are different from us, who have had a different journey than we have had.

That's not typically how we see it, is it? How many of us have done a home remodeling project or added onto our house with the idea that entertaining and hospitality will be so much easier? And how many of us, upon the project's completion have invited people we don't know, people who really needed a place to stay or who really needed a meal, into our freshly remodeled space? And if we did, have we done it over and over again? One article I read this week invited me to compare the number of empty guest rooms in our nation's houses with the number of homeless people in our country. I don't know what those numbers are, but based on how many empty rooms are in my own house, I think it is safe to say that it would be possible to provide shelter for more people. And if we did, what might the people we invite into our homes, the unlikely missionaries, show us about the ways of Jesus?

And what reward might we enjoy with them? I think now is a good time to say this out loud. It is harder to love people we don't know very well. It is harder to love people we disagree with. It is harder to love people whose lives and priorities and ways of being we don't understand. But in this passage, and throughout the Bible, we are told that God calls us to that kind of love. And I don't know about you, but my experience has been that the more practice I have at loving, the better I get at it. I don't get better at loving by showing love to my husband. I chose him. Loving him is easy. I get better at loving by showing love and concern for the person whose worldview is so unlike mine that I wonder how we can be living in the same community. Or by loving the person who makes the same mistakes over and over again, causing turmoil for an

entire family. That's the reward. The reward is that the more we love, the harder we love, the better at loving we get. In this time and place, in the United States of America, in Bartlesville, OK, we need to get better at loving.

As I listened to Brenda's choices of patriotic music for this Sunday, I thought about what it means for us to be free in light of today's text. The freedom we are celebrating this weekend is freedom for everyone. And frankly, we have fallen short in this country. The moment people from across the Atlantic stepped foot on this land, the freedoms of "the other" have been in jeopardy. And hundreds of years later, there are people in our country who are not free. We say we are a country that guarantees religious freedom and insists on the separation between the church and state. Yet, Christians everywhere proclaim loudly that this is a Christian nation. It is not. It is a nation where Muslims are free to be Muslim. Jewish people are free to be Jewish. Hindus are free to be Hindu. Christians are free to be Christians. In this country, people are free to practice any faith or no faith at all.

I cannot speak for other faith traditions, but my idea of freedom, as a Christian, is the freedom to love everyone, no matter who and no matter what. I am grateful for the freedoms we have, but I am mindful this day that many of our Muslim brothers and sisters do not experience religious freedom the way I do. I am mindful that our neighbors who do not practice a specific religion are made to feel "less than" when others proclaim this a Christian nation. I am mindful that passing legislation that is based solely on one interpretation of one faith tradition's ideology alienates many and divides our country. And last, I remember that I have seen the ways of Jesus in my friends, Rebecca and Khalid, a Rabbi and Imam, over and over.

We are called to this hard love which, if we do it right, builds unity and creates hope for another way, a different world. We are called to be

that cold drink of water for our thirsty, weary neighbors and for one another. And if we think about what it meant to provide a cup of cold water for Matthew's readers, we can appreciate that all the more. Water was gathered in clay jars and quickly became lukewarm in the desert heat. Providing cold water required an extra measure of hospitality...you had to really want the water to be cold. It meant a well-timed, extra trip to the well. This was exceptional hospitality that stretched the hostess and host beyond the ordinary, way beyond what was expected. The world needs us to stretch ourselves.

I would like to end with a thought from Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber, pastor of a Lutheran Church in Denver called House for All Saints and Sinners. In her book, *Accidental Saints*, she writes, "No one gets to play Jesus. But we do get to *experience* Jesus in the holy place where we meet others' needs and have our own needs met." These holy places where we encounter unlikely missionaries, where we stretch ourselves, are the places God reveals Godself to us. I cannot think of a better reward.

Happy Independence Day...you are free to love everyone. Amen.