

Myers Park Covenant Church

“Prophets, Little Ones, and “A Cup of Cool”

by Reverend Dr. Bill Leonard

Matthew 10:40-42

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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus sent them out—TWELVE OF THEM, including Simon Peter and Andrew, brothers who were “casting their nets” by the Sea of Galilee, when he found them. “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fish for people.” And the Bible says: “IMMEDIATELY they left their nets and followed him.” (Matt 4:18-20) The brothers had not the slightest idea where he would take them; but they went IMMEDIATELY. (We never know when and where God’s grace will find us, do we?)

The Twelve were the first wave of a movement that stretches down to this very morning. The sending of the Twelve is the context of the entire 10th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Today’s two-verse text concludes that chapter with one last set of instructions, instructions they needed and we do too. But before we get to the prophets, the little ones, and the “cup of cool,” let’s recall where this chapter is taking US with a few quick questions.

Question one: Who is Jesus sending out? The twelve apostles—in fact, the word apostle literally means “sent one.” But they’re only the first ones, the Gospel Avant Garde. From the early church to right now, we’re all SENT ONES after we find Jesus or he finds us!

Luke chapter 10 tells us that Jesus soon “appointed seventy others and sent them of ahead of him in pairs to every town and places where he himself intended to go.” (Luke 10:1) From the very start, Jesus TRUSTED those who followed him to tell the story FOR HIM, WITH HIM, AFTER HIM! He captivated them, instructed them, trusted them, and sent them out. Their bystander days were over.

Question two: What is Jesus asking the sent ones to do? Care for people, especially those at the end of the pain chain. “He gave them authority,” the text says, “over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and cure every disease and every sickness.” He sent them on their way, saying: “Cure the sick, raise the dead (?), cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” Think about it: From the first group of messengers Jesus sent out, he makes no distinction in their calling to address the **spiritual and physical needs** of people they encounter.

Holy Medicare, folks. Do you realize that our nation is confronting those same issues RIGHT NOW? Inside and outside the church we are divided over how to care for those who need healing from “pre-existing conditions,” need cleansing from years of chronic pain—physical, mental, spiritual—and need some way to cast out the demons of alcohol, opioids, racism, and/or arrogance. Ok, we can’t raise the dead. But can’t we at least get folks to hospice so they can die with care and dignity?

We know that our current government is shredding Medicaid AND the **Affordable** Care Act as fast as it can, but we also know that from the very beginning Jesus mandated an **Apostolic** Care Act of all who would leave their nets and follow him, who would work for and with those who are hurting, overlooked, and underserved. We are called to respond to those in need, which, BTW, is every one of us sooner or later.

On this 4th of July weekend, national health care conversations and controversies force us to reexamine our own churchly mission and ministry. Folks, what if needs become so great that churches have to start or expand community clinics, not just because the poor ones, rural ones, the old ones, and the little ones are losing it but because of Jesus?

Question three: What is their apostolic message? Jesus gives it to them (and us) in a single sentence: “As you go proclaim the good news: The Kingdom of heaven has come near you.” Then and now, that’s the best message we have, not just in here, but OUT THERE! In case you haven’t noticed, people are leaving American churches in droves or simply choosing not to show up at all. One in five Americans claims no religious affiliation whatsoever, one in 3 Gen zs, ages 18-30. How are we going to show them that God’s New Day has come near and has meaning right now?

Question four: And what does the Kingdom of Heaven, God’s New Day, mean? It means that God’s grace is never far away; and we must learn to live like that is the case. Jesus sets it out for himself and for US in his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth: “The spirit of the Lord is upon US—to preach good news...to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, to proclaim that this is a GOOD YEAR because God has come close to us.” That is our calling; that is what we are SENT to declare and to act on.

Question five: And what will happen to those who decide to GO OUT, declaring and acting on that GOOD NEWS? The “sent ones,” are vulnerable from the start. Jesus tells them: don’t take your purse, your shoes, a change of clothes, or an ATM card. Depend on God’s beloved community to take care of you. When people bless you, bless them; when they don’t, then “shake the dust off your shoes” from who they are, and where they live.

Then he adds, “And **when** you are arrested.” **Not if, but when.** Jesus supposes that living and declaring the good news doesn’t just make you vulnerable, it makes you an endangered species! So they must rely on the communion of saints, the people of God, the body of Christ, the church, to sustain them along the way. If we’re going to follow Jesus into God’s New Day, we have to learn the dangers, and the dependence. Good news will give us strength to care for the least of these, but it will also make us vulnerable to rejection, hunger, loneliness, and other dangers. Get ready. Learn to let others help you along the way.

Which brings us to this morning's text. Let's read it one more time: "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."

Did you hear that? "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me," Jesus said to them and yes, even to us. What an audacious assurance. When we offer the good news of God's grace, Jesus joins us in the effort. Care for the "sent ones" is care for Jesus as well. That ought to scare the heaven into us, when we act apostolic, and when we welcome those who bring the good news.

And then there are prophets. "Whoever welcomes a prophet receives a prophet's reward. Cathleen Kaveny says that prophets provide a "kind of *moral chemotherapy* . . . a brutal but necessary response to aggressive forms of moral malignancy."¹ That's true, but one of the great questions then and now is: Who is a prophet and who is not, and how do you know the difference? In the early church, before there were settled pastors, there were traveling prophets, who often went from church to church declaring the word and moving on. The Apostle Paul was a kind of traveling prophet who's journeys and letters connected with congregations he helped start or sustain. But sometimes prophets did more damage than they did good. In II Corinthians, Paul himself calls them "super-apostles" who came to Corinth "proclaiming another Jesus" and "a different gospel" than the one we proclaimed." (II Cor. 11: 4) They apparently tweeted out a 16-word critique of Paul: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." In other words, he writes good letters, but he can't preach a lick.

Distinguishing between true and false prophets is a challenge that runs from the early church to your pastor search committee. (I'm just saying.) Early Christians developed a creative test, published in a little book called the *Didache*, or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, probably written around the year 110. It goes like this:

Let every prophet who comes to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he shall not stay more than one day, and if it is necessary, the next day also. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when a prophet leaves, let him take nothing except bread to last until he finds his next lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet. ²

You gotta love it. They welcomed everyone who came to them with prophetic witness but wouldn't let them stay long enough to mess things up. I was once teaching about all this at a weekend conference at a church in Kentucky, and when read this passage about traveling prophets, somebody in the back yelled, "It's your third day!"

¹ Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 312.

² *The Didache*, in Edgar Goodspeed, editor, *The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950, 16.

The text clarifies the nature of the prophet by linking it with the righteous person who is to be welcomed by the righteous. Still, distinguishing true prophets from false remains a challenge for the church.

The chapter ends, and in a way begins all over again, with the “Little ones.” In the last verse of Matthew chapter 10 Jesus sweeps all of us up with a minimal mandate for all disciples: Ok, we may not be able to hit the road for the kingdom; healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, casting out demons, or even getting arrested for the gospel’s sake.

But we can all give a cup of cool to the little ones, the vulnerable ones, the hurting ones in the world and in the kingdom of God. Actually, the Greek text here is even more minimal. It simply uses the phrase: “a cup of cool, or a cup of cold,” the word for water is not included in the text but is implied. You see, in the first century, pre-refrigeration era, cold water meant stream water, flowing fresh and free, or well water from deep in the ground. It took extra effort to get it. Cold water meant safe water, refreshing and generally without danger of disease or pollution. Everybody knew what a cup of cool meant.

In fact, the *Didache* from which we just read, prescribes cold, running water as the primary water for baptism. “Baptize in running water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit. If you have no running water, baptize in other water (ugh!), and if you cannot use cold water, use warm.”³ In baptism or in a cup, cold water is water that refreshes, protects, and is safe. See, regardless of what we CAN’T all do to bring in God’s new day, we can all do something, we can give a cup of cool, especially to the little ones, the ones whose faith is just beginning, the ones whose faith is yet to come, and the ones who are thirsty for grace even if they don’t know that’s what they are thirsty for. ****

Jesus said it best in 15 chapters later in Matthew’s gospel, when you do it for one of the least of these—the little ones—you do it unto me.” A cup of cool, a taste of bread, a sip of wine—small but inescapable reminders that the Kingdom of Heaven is still within our reach.

³ Ibid, 14.