

Bigger than we think

Mark 9:38-41

September 27, 2015

Giving a drink of water. It's a simple act, but that is why it is so powerful, because it is so simple. No hidden agendas. No mixed motives. No quid pro quo. You just offer a drink of water, because you want to, because it is needed. And what you offer, a drink of water, is not a treat or a present or a luxury, but life itself. Am I overstating it?

When you give the drink, you make a connection. You are bound to the one to whom you give it. You and he and the water itself are bound together by the act of sharing. But the water is not yours. It did not come from you. God is the maker, God is the giver, of water. So when you give a drink of water, you and the one to whom you give it are both bound by it to God, both brought into communion with God who is the source of water and of life. Am I overstating it?

Today, I offered the drink of water, but actually, ten days ago, it was Paul who offered a drink of water to me. It was at Bible study, and I was coughing, bothered then, as I am still, by some kind of virus that doesn't seem to want to let me go. Paul offered me a bottle of water, his bottle of water, and, after some words of polite protest, I took it and drank it and was blessed! It was that night and in my memory now a most precious gift, the gift to me of the water and the gift to me of Paul himself. Am I overstating it?

Giving a drink of water is a big deal! It is the small (seemingly small), insignificant (seemingly insignificant), personal (but widely consequential), acts of kindness that carry the full weight of the love of God. This, I think, is what makes the message Pope Francis proclaims so compelling.

Hasn't it been thrilling to watch and listen as he makes his first visit to our nation? Oh, how I am gladdened and energized to hear this voice, his voice, speaking to the world and the powers of this world, on behalf of his church, yes, but, really, speaking the heart of Jesus! This is the Christian witness we need to hear! This is the gospel that must be proclaimed: a gospel of generosity and charity, of welcome and inclusion, of making peace and healing wounds, of taking care of all of God's creation, from the littlest and the least to the whole of creation itself. Thank God, it is being said! Thank God, it is being heard!

But others, too, have spoken of injustice and economic inequality, of caring for the poor and the frail, for the stranger and the outcast. Others, too, have talked of showing mercy and of making peace.

But it is the messenger, this messenger, that makes the message ring true, because of the little things, the small gestures, the simple acts: wearing plain leather shoes instead of ornate red Pradas under his papal robes; riding in a humble Fiat instead of a sleek limousine; leaving the halls of Congress after his address to the joint chambers to eat and pray with a group of homeless people; leaving his car to bless and kiss a young man with cerebral palsy.

It is the little words, the short, informal statements, full of grace and humor and love, which unveil the genuine heart of Jesus that lives in him and speaks through him. “I am a child of immigrants,” he said. “Who am I to judge?” he said. Or these words, addressed to the homeless people gathered in St. Matthew’s Cathedral: “In prayer, there are no rich or poor people. There are sons and daughters. Today I want to be one with you. I need your support, your closeness.” Or this benediction given to United Nations staff members: “Dear friends, I bless each one of you from my heart. I will pray for you and your families, and I ask each of you, please, to remember to pray for me. And if any of you are not believers, I ask you to wish me well.”

Words of grace. Words that do not bind, but set free. Words that make invitation into the wide, so wide, embrace of God’s love.

It’s the small, insignificant, personal acts of kindness that carry the full weight of the love of God. Every kind word, every gracious gesture, every drink of water given, is a seed, a seed of hope.

But we need to turn the camera around! We have been focused on giving drinks of water, speaking kind words, planting seeds of hope, but Jesus’ response to John’s report is not about giving, but about receiving.

Teacher, we saw a man who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop ... because he doesn't belong to our group.

The disciples were concerned about defining boundaries, about maintaining integrity, about controlling the message, but Jesus replies, “Do not try to stop him.” Because? Because “whoever is not against us is for us.” In other words, if you are thinking in terms of them and us, “us” is a lot bigger than you think!

I must confess that sometimes I feel kind of lonely, like a voice crying in the wilderness, even among fellow Christians. There is so much that comes out of the mouths of men and women claiming to speak for Jesus that makes me cringe or leaves me cold. I’m neither here nor there, not at home among the ranks of flag-waving conservative evangelicals, but neither at home among iconoclastic, God-talk-disdaining liberals. Half the church seems to have forgotten that it is all about love and the other half seems to have forgotten that

love comes from God and that without the grace of God made real in Jesus we are nothing. So I feel like “my group” is pretty small and I wish all these others spouting nonsense in Jesus’ name would just go away! And I grow discouraged, wondering if the gospel message, that world-changing, life-affirming, hope-inspiring message, is at risk of being lost.

Oh, Tim. Get over yourself! “Whoever is not against us is for us,” says the Lord Jesus. “I am glad to have you on my team, but my team is so much bigger than you think! By all means, continue to do your work in my name diligently and faithfully, speaking the truth, taking care of my little ones, giving a drink of water, but know, too, that there are now and will be many, many, many others serving me, speaking the truth, taking care of little ones, giving a drink of water ... even to you!”

This is the seed of hope Jesus plants in us. Or do you think the gospel will be lost? Do you think Jesus will fail? Do you think God’s kingdom will not come? God is being patient! God wants all -- all -- to be saved!

God is waiting. God is waiting, giving us a chance, giving all of us a chance, to make something beautiful of our lives. This is our time, we have time, to be about the work of God’s kingdom. This is our time, we have time, to nurture the seed of hope Jesus has planted in us and let it blossom.