Matthew 10:40-42

40 ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.41Whoever 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;42and 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.’

When Jesus sends his disciples out into the world, into the towns and villages, the instructions that he gives are **not at all complicated**.

He tells the disciples to go out proclaiming the good news “the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near,” while curing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, and healing lepers. Having taken a class in systematic theology, I believe that even raising the dead and casting out demons is not nearly as difficult as reading some theological treatises. I’m not saying that theology is not important, but we have to be careful not to lose focus on what Jesus calls us to do. It’s astounding that we can get so engrossed in theology and get into such arguments with others while forgetting the simplicity of our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ. What Jesus would have us do is not expound some complicated theory or religious system; what our Savior instructs us to do is both practical and simple: Preach the good news, and take care of people’s needs. Were we to summarize Jesus’ teachings, they too would be quite simple and practical: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says that all of scripture hinge on these two commandments.

There is an elegant simplicity in this message; **love God, love neighbor, love self.** And everything else that Jesus tell us to do is the natural result of such love. Loving God and loving others means healing, teaching, comforting others. Love is made manifest in our actions. What attracted people to Jesus was not so much his teaching as it was his healing; the blind wanted to see. The lame wanted to walk. The leper wanted to be healed. And not all who were healed came to believe in Christ but rather those who could see the connection between their healing and God’s love. And if you could make the connection between healing and God’s love, you could by extension believe the message, “the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.” The Christ, the Son of God, is in our midst. Emmanuel: God with us. Welcoming the kingdom of heaven is synonymous with welcoming Jesus Christ, the one who holds authority in this world and gives his disciples the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick.

In the verses leading up to today’s reading, Jesus warns his disciples that things will not always go smoothly for them. They will confront more than indifference;the message will be a cause of division. Families will be divided, some entering the kingdom while others reject it. Discipleship will disrupt family relationships; Jesus declares that anyone who loves mother or father or son or daughter more than Jesus is not worthy of him. Discipleship will involve suffering; whoever does not take up his/her cross and follow Jesus is not worthy of him. Discipleship will cost us our lives, but, Jesus says, to gain life you must lose it, and those who lose their lives in Christ will gain eternal life.

Jesus does not make discipleship sound very appealing, does he? His expectations of disciples can make us wary of our own standing with Christ. Can we make the sacrifices that Jesus is telling us that we have to make? Can we carry the cross? Can we forfeit our lives? Self-doubt can lead us to distinguish a common practicing Christian *believer* from a disciple. Believers need only profess faith in Christ; disciples have to carry crosses and lose their lives. Yet Jesus never makes such a distinction. Remember the great commission that we studied last week: Jesus instructs his disciples to go and make disciples (not *believers*) of all nations. The problem with being merely a believer is that it can be an excuse to do nothing; belief can be invisible and passive. Discipleship is obvious and active, and belief should spawn discipleship. If you *believe* that Christ has truly saved your life, everything that you do – how you do your job, how you relate to strangers, how you care for those in need - reflects that belief. If you believe that your life is lived for Christ, you can declare as Paul declares, “Death, where is your sting?” And if death has no sting, you become truly free to live! You can love God and love others without fear of anything, and carrying the figurative cross is not a burden but a privilege, because it bears witness to your Lord and Savior. Belief implies discipleship.

Today’s reading comes at the end of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples before he sends them out “like sheep among wolves.” He is telling his disciples how to recognize new disciples: “Whoever welcomes you …whoever gives even a cold cup of water to one of you….” Note that the word “believe” does not appear in today’s scripture verses. It’s those who “welcome” the disciples who also “welcome” Jesus. It’s those who “give a cup of cold water to one of these little ones” who will be rewarded. Jesus’ point is to emphasize action. *Belief* is something that cannot be discerned by appearance, and even proclamation of belief is no proof of belief. I recall how, in the days before I had faith in Christ, I was on occasion confronted by evangelists who would ask me up front if I believed in Jesus Christ, to which I would usually respond “yes” simply as a way to avoid further discussion. It was a lie at the time. Actions speak much louder than words.

And Jesus expects his disciples to act the way Jesus taught them to act. He indirectly states that the twelve disciples are, like Jesus, prophets and righteous persons; “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet receives a prophet’s reward; whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person receives the reward of a righteous person. Jesus is both prophet and righteous person, and his disciples are expected to be the same. A disciple is called to be prophets, which, by the way, is not the same thing as a fortuneteller; “prophet” comes from the two words *pro* (before or in front of) and phema (to speak), so it’s literally one who speaks before a crowd or speaks to people warning them to change their behavior before something bad happens. If God gives you a clear picture of what His kingdom on earth should look like, and you speak out against those forces that inhibit God’s kingdom from coming, you are speaking prophetically.

A disciple is also called to be a righteous person, one who does the right things for himself and for others. We are not called simply to be “self” righteous (not cursing, not drinking, not missing church), but we are expected to be “socially” righteous as well, protecting the interests of those who cannot protect themselves, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and, yes, declaring the good news: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Simply said, we represent Jesus, and thus we represent God. WE BRING GOD’S PRESENCE TO OTHERS. Anyone who welcomes one of his disciples welcomes Jesus. It’s implied that our behavior exemplifies Jesus’ behavior, who was both a prophet and a righteous man. Like Jesus, we are motivated by our vision of God’s kingdom and our love for humanity.

Finally I would say that Jesus wants us to refrain from judging and to appreciate the little things. There is no way to quantitatively determine who does enough good deeds to enter the kingdom of heaven. The answer is no one and everyone. True, faith is evidenced in works, but as disciples we need to recognize the little steps people take in faith, the cups of cold water that seem insignificant yet indicate that you are being welcomed. I recall the story of a Special Education teacher who had a class of high school students with behavioral disorders. Too often those behavioral disorders translate into an indifference toward teacher and lessons. One student constantly cursed and paid no respect to this teacher, but after eight months of dedicated service, the teacher and principal were walking down the hall one day, and this student muttered, “m-----f----ing” Mr. Jones. The principal was in shock and asked, “Did you hear what he called you?” to which Mr. Jones responded, “Yeah. He called me ‘Mister.’” Just a glass of cold water can speak volumes.

Appreciating the little things and don’t be judgmental. And show your appreciation for those who do those little things for you. Why does Jesus tell his disciples how to recognize those who truly welcome him, and by extension, welcome the kingdom? To keep them humble. The disciples may be casting out demons and healing the sick and giving sight to the blind all by Jesus’ authority, but the person who offers a drink of water to the disciple receives the same reward for his little act of kindness. And just as that person who gave you that little drink of water was by extension welcoming Christ, the disciple needs to welcome that person as if that person were Christ. The bottom line is this: if everyone was a disciple of Jesus Christ and treated everyone as if they were Jesus Christ, the world would be a pretty nice place, wouldn’t it?

I’d like to challenge you this week to do two things. First, do something welcoming for someone else this week. I’m going to try this, too. Put a few bottles of water in your refrigerator today, and when you go out during the week, carry the cold water with you. When you see people working outdoors, doing yard or construction or manual labor, just give a bottle of water and tell them that Jesus loves them. Even if the person doesn’t speak English, I will bet that he or she will know what you mean. You don’t even have to leave your house; you can give water to the mail carrier or the sanitation worker. Try to see the Christ in you serving that person.

Second, be on the lookout for those little welcoming actions of others, and when you recognize such an act, appreciate it. Tell the person how good it made you feel, how thankful you are. Try to see Christ in that person serving you.

I pray that these two little tasks will help you better envision what the kingdom of heaven is all about. May God empower us to serve as disciples of Christ and rejoice when God uses others to serve us. Amen.