

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
June 26, 2011
Matthew 10:40-42

Proper 8, Year A

It's refreshing just to think about it: being given a cup of cool water as you're traveling in the heat. The Greek highlights the sense of refreshment even more: in the Greek, the phrase is literally "gives a cup of cool." The phrase itself feels refreshing, to drink a cup of cool.

And as refreshing as the idea of being given a cup of cool is to me, I am reading it from my comfortable life in Virginia. The disciples Jesus was sending out to do their ministry did not live in the pleasant environment of Virginia. The land they are walking across does not have trees. It does not have shade. It has a lot of heat and a lot of blazing sun. When I was in the Holy Land on my pilgrimage, it was November, one of the milder times of year, and let me tell you, that place is hot. It is dry and it is hot. For me, a cup of cool water is welcome and refreshing; for disciples who are walking across land that is largely desert, a cup of cool water has a whole different meaning.

The human body can survive for a surprisingly long time without food. But if you don't have water in a climate like that, you're toast. Being given a cup of cool water is not only refreshing as a lovely pleasure, it can sometimes make the difference between whether or not you live to see the next day of your travels. A cup of cool water is refreshing on the most basic level.

And so the simplest gift someone can give can change someone's life forever. When Jesus sent the disciples out to do their ministry, they were doing important work, no question. Today, we ask the question: how important are the people who give the disciples a cup of cool water all along their travels? The ministry of the disciples continues not just because of what the twelve do, their ministry continues because of a wide variety of people who offer them a cup of cool water, a meal, a place to sleep, a word of encouragement. The disciples are able to go forward because of the people who believe in the value of what they are doing and want to support it.

For the disciples, these people's gifts have both practical and spiritual value. On a practical level, the gifts meet their physical needs, and enable them to continue doing

God's work in the world. But for these disciples who have left behind their homes, their families, their fishing boats, and the social connections that shaped their lives, it is often a lonely and vulnerable life, and so the people who believe that they are doing God's work in the world and want to contribute to that are a source of strength and encouragement in their spiritual lives as well.

On my very first day on the staff at St. Thomas's Richmond, I remember June Hardy Dorsey telling me, "All of us on the church staff work hard, and there are times when each of us gets discouraged, but we don't all get discouraged at the same time, so we help each other get back on track." And during the three years I served there, I found she was absolutely right. In the times when I felt like I was wilting, plodding along in the heat, somebody else would show up with a cup of cool, which was exactly what I needed. Other times, I had water to give to perk somebody else up when they were in the heat and had miles to go.

In fact, that's one of the reasons it's good to come to church. On the days when you're going through a dry spell, folks in your faith community can give you a cup of water. On the days when all your own needs are met, it is a great feeling to be able to provide encouragement and refreshment to someone else. While the idea of being "spiritual but not religious" may sound nice in theory, in reality the more distant you are from a faith community, the more likely you are to become a spiritual couch potato. We all have good intentions about our spiritual lives, but a rich spiritual life is not likely to just happen to you in your sleep. It's not likely to happen to you in isolation. Who do we think we're kidding here? Come on, get out of bed and come to church. You'll be glad you did.

And for those of us who are in church, it is wonderful to remember that we give and receive cups of cool water not only from people in our own congregation, but from people who are doing God's work in the world in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes the things that refresh us can be simple. We got a letter this week that felt like a cup of cool water. It said, "Dear Rev. Lucia Lloyd and the good people of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, We received your letter today informing us that as a church you will be praying for St. Paul's Catholic Mission and its members this week. What a gracious, generous, and thoughtful gift on your part. Thank you for it and for all the good that comes of your

prayers. Your letter will be posted on the bulletin board in our church for our congregation to read. May our Lord Jesus, who inspires such goodness in the hearts of those who believe, bless you all in return! In Christ, Fr. John M O'Donohue.” It makes you smile just to listen to it, doesn't it? I've never met Fr. O'Donohue, but getting a letter like this one is refreshing. Our prayers for our Neighborhood Church of the Week as they go about their ministries might seem like a small gift, but it is refreshing to the person who receives it, and writing a lovely letter with a blessing might seem like a small gift to us, but it is refreshing to us in our ministry.

It is wonderful to think of how many good people there are doing God's work in the world, how many forms of ministry are taking place, by laypeople and ordained people, men and women, old and young. There are people we admire for the way they live their faith and do ministry in the world, both people we know personally and people who are public figures, saints, heroes of the faith. We admire them for the good they do, and rightly so. But they would be the first to tell you that they did not accomplish those things alone; each of them had people who believed in the value of what they were doing and gave them the encouragement, the resources, and the support to do it. The supporters move along the leader just as the leader moves along the supporters.

Jesus specifically emphasizes the importance of taking care of three kinds of people: prophets, righteous people, and little ones who are disciples. Prophets are the ones who carry God's message to turn away from sin, create justice for the poor instead of exploiting them, and follow God, and prophets warn us, when we get complacent, of the consequences. It is not a pleasant task. People tend to admire prophets once they are safely dead, but since prophets upset the status quo, society usually makes life miserable for them while they are alive. So prophets need all the help and support they can get. The Church in every generation would get way too complacent if we had no prophets. But you do not necessarily have to be a prophet yourself. Jesus tells us, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.” If your calling is not to be a prophet yourself, take care of and support the people who are prophets.

In Greek, there is one word that means both “justice” and “righteousness” because treating the poor and oppressed with justice is the same as being righteous: both are doing

the right thing. “Righteousness” has taken on a somewhat different connotation in English, which is too bad, because it can sound a bit prissy when Jesus is really talking about working for justice for the oppressed and the poor. Those who do ministries of righteousness and justice are also people Jesus specifically encourages us to support and care for, while they care for those who are most vulnerable. The third kind of people Jesus mentions, are the ones he calls “little ones,” which is a term of endearment for the disciples that shows up several times in Matthew’s gospel. We do the same sort of thing when we say things like, “come on, boys, let’s get to work” or “you go, girl”; they’re terms of casual affection, not indications of childhood. Jesus is saying, “Hey, give a cup of cool to these boys, they’re my disciples after all.”

But what I love best about the whole give-a cup-of-cool-water principle is that it enables each of us to transcend our limitations. I’ll give three examples that many of you are familiar with already. One of my limitations is that I don’t speak Spanish. I firmly believe that the spiritual needs of Spanish-speakers are every bit as important as the spiritual needs of English-speakers, and I believe that it is tremendously important for the Church to meet the spiritual needs of Spanish-speakers, but I do not speak Spanish. I really value people who do ministry with Spanish-speakers, such as Brooke Carillo. Even though I don’t have Spanish fluency myself, I do have water. I can buy a Bible in Spanish for six bucks and give it to Brooke Carillo, so that the people she ministers to can read the Bible in their own language. Giving a cup of cool water to support her ministry transcends my own language barrier. Giving a cup of cool water is refreshing for her, and it is rewarding for me.

I also really admire Lauren Stanley’s ministry in Haiti and the Sudan. While I am staying in the comforts of my American life and the safety it provides, I am very grateful that she is willing to take on the deprivations and dangers of going to a different culture and ministering to some of the most vulnerable people in the world. And I am very grateful that when she comes back she is challenging the complacency and self-absorption of American Christians. I am not living that kind of life myself, but I have a checkbook. I can give a cup of cool water to a missionary in the Sudan. I can give a week’s worth of food for what it would cost to buy one restaurant dinner for myself.

Giving a cup of cool water to support her ministry transcends the barriers of my location. Giving a cup of cool water is refreshing for her, and it is rewarding for me.

It also transcends the limitations of scale. One of the reasons we contribute to the diocesan budget is that we are giving a cup of cool water to ministries that are beyond our scope. We know it is important for college students to have good college chaplains, because a good ministry during the college years often determines whether they will have a strong faith for the rest of their lives or whether they will drift away from faith forever. Our giving provides a cup of cool water to fund college chaplains. We know that ministry in areas hit by natural disaster needs extra support, so we give a cup of cool water to laypeople who lead relief efforts and those who minister in disaster. A broke seminarian who has given up his or her income to study for the ministry can do a lot with a cup of cool water. The laypeople on the diocesan staff who provide ministry to teens, the budget for improving race relations, those who minister to the elderly, the list is long. We are the diocese, and giving a cup of cool water to those who need it is refreshing for them and rewarding for us.

Last week's sermon was on the doctrine of the Trinity. This week we have a practical application to daily life sermon. So I'm going to give each of you an empty cup, and I'm going to ask you to think of someone who is doing God's work in the world in some way, which can be either lay ministry or ordained ministry, either one. And I'm going to ask you to do one thing this week to follow Jesus' teachings to give a cup of cool water to that person. The only person you can't pick is me; you have to use your imagination a little more than that. Think of what would be a cup of cool water for that person who does good ministry in the world. It might be money. It might be a letter of encouragement. It might be a bottle of wine or a casserole. It might be your help with a task. If you want to do something extravagant, go for it, if you want to do something small and simple, that's good too. Any action beyond what you would normally do that would be a way of following Jesus' teachings to give a cup of cool water to a prophet, a righteous person, or a disciple.

How much of a difference can a cup of cool water make in someone's ministry? Well, how much difference has it made that Jim Godwin and Heathsville United Methodist Church believed in this congregation's ministry and welcomed us and gave us

a cup of cool water? The scripture passage appointed for today really is perfect for today as we give thanks for his ministry on his last Sunday before his retirement. Four and a half years ago, this was a band of faithful and devoted Episcopalians who were determined to keep worshipping God as St. Stephen's Episcopal Church even though you had nothing but God and each other. The practical value of the Methodists welcoming this congregation into their worship space and providing their hospitality to this congregation has been huge. To be embraced by Christians of another denomination was a great help to your spiritual lives as well. In times that felt like a traveling through a wilderness or a desert, the hospitality of being taken in and cared for made a big difference. Jim Godwin and the Methodists believed in the value of what this congregation was doing and wanted to do what they could to support it. Others also gave cups of cool water: prayer books, hymnals, money (thank you to Grace, Kilmarnock), clergy, notes of encouragement, supplies. As time went on, people bought tickets to the Barbecue and the Oyster Roast not only because they're fabulous events, but also because they believed in the value of what this congregation was doing and they wanted to contribute to it. And then we've gotten such wonderful newcomers, people who believe in this ministry and want to be a part of it, people who love you just the way you are, building or no building, and who are happy to be with you no matter what the circumstances. So the new folks say the old folks are refreshing, and the old folks say the new folks are refreshing, and the distinctions don't matter anyway, because we're all part of the family together now. It's all refreshing, it's all rewarding. It's all good. It makes you feel refreshed just thinking about it.