

There is an old Rabbinic saying that goes like this:

“Whoever welcomes another person is considered as though  
they had welcomed the Divine Presence.

Our reading today has its origin in this very old belief.

Jesus takes it further to say that your actions will be reflected back to you.

He adds the word *reward* - your actions will be returned to you as a *reward*.

Your welcoming actions will at some time in the future be reflected back to you.

He was sending out disciples to share his teachings in a hostile world.

And the disciples would be received by prophets, or teachers, and other righteous persons  
and the disciples will also receive these persons.

Then he adds the little ones, or anyone who is vulnerable, without power or authority.

We have a responsibility to welcome those who are vulnerable.

The disciples would face opposition, but he assured them that God would go with them.

He said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me  
welcomes the one who sent me.”

Here are some principles for living that he lays down for the disciples.

They are as true for you and me today as they were then  
if we want to walk this path.

For one thing, he was telling them that they would be received,  
and that in turn they were to receive others. They were to practice this kind of hospitality.

This is an early and fundamental characteristic of Christian worship and community -  
the act of welcoming – the act of receiving – the act of making a space for.  
The image of the “cold cup of water” would certainly have been important at that time,  
for cool water would be water freshly drawn from a well and very welcome  
– so it is a wonderful metaphor.

I talked about intrusions in our lives a few weeks ago,  
and the kind of receiving in our reading today is often more of that intrusion kind of receiving.

Karen Mains has a book called “Open Heart, Open Home.”  
She distinguishes between Hospitality and entertaining.

For example, have you ever heard yourself say, “As soon as I get the house finished,  
the living room decorated, my house cleaning done – then I will start inviting people over.”

Entertaining puts things before people.

It is our space and we invite others when we are ready –  
when we feel it expresses what we want to share about ourselves.  
Nothing wrong at all with it – it is friendly – it is gracious – it is enjoyable.

I love to do it.

It is just not what hospitality means in scripture.  
Hospitality tries to find the God spaces – the spaces for the mystery of the divine to unfold.

This is what I want to give you today - finding the God spaces –  
the spaces of fertile ground for the Spirit to work.  
The Spirit seems to like the spaces between strangers - to teach and to bless -  
seems strange but true.

I want to use the phrase a “cup of cold water”  
as a way to represent what is gracious, what is needed by another, often a stranger.  
I would like for us to extend it to making a space for the unknown,  
for the unknown may sometimes be the divine.

Let’s go a little deeper into hospitality.  
I’ll give you some images – little stories - to play with in your mind to expand this idea  
because it is much bigger than just receiving a guest in our home.  
It is to be aware of what God may do in the places between us –  
which would be in our relationships with one another.  
I want to call both the space and the possibility the “cup of cold water.”  
These little stories – are “cups of cold water” for us to drink in.  
Let them be our teachers today. Picture them as I say the words.

Russian author Leo Tolstoy once wrote a story about a shoemaker who was making his way home one night - when he found a man shivering and poorly clad.

The shoemaker was moved by pity and took the man home. His wife was not pleased.

She complained about the cost of feeding another mouth.

As she continued to complain, the stranger grew smaller and smaller, more shriveled and wrinkled with every unkind word.

But when she spoke kindly to the stranger and gave him food, he grew and became more beautiful.

Tolstoy writes that the stranger was an angel taking on human form.

The angel could live only in an atmosphere of kindness and love.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that we are to be hospitable to strangers, for some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:2)

Sometimes we are too busy complaining, too busy thinking about our own needs.

When we do that we forget about receiving and being received.

We forget about the cup of cold water – or perhaps this time – a cup of warm soup - the shoemaker and the angel.

The act of receiving the stranger and *how* we do so and *what* happens – makes a world of difference.

This ancient principle was a part of Jesus' teaching to the disciples, and here it is in another form in Tolstoy's story.

Today, we might hear a version of it in the DVD, *The Secret*, that is, how we contribute to and create our own realities through our openness to what may unfold before us.

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Let's shift now to a second image:

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, was asked this question:

What was the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture?

What answer would you expect?

Perhaps a clay pot, a fish hook, a grinding stone?

Her answer was "a healed femur."

The femur, of course, is the leg bone above the knee.  
Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle,  
survival of the fittest, reigned.  
A healed femur shows that someone cared.  
Someone had to do the hunting and gathering for another person until their leg healed.

The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.  
And surely it is also the first sign of the work of Christ in the life of a Christian. <sup>1</sup>

It is an expression of hospitality no less today than then.  
A cup of cold water – a space for healing – a healed femur.

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Let's shift again to a third and final image:  
In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman tells a story  
of an American soldier in Vietnam.  
His platoon was hunkered down in the rice paddies  
locked into the heat of a firefight with the Vietcong.  
The rice fields in Vietnam are often separated by an earthen beam.  
On this day, a line of six Buddhist monks started walking along the elevated beam  
separating the field where the American soldiers lay hugging the ground  
and the field where the Vietcong were also crouched in battle.

The monks walked directly toward the line of fire, calmly and steadily.  
They did not look to the left or to the right - they just kept walking.

The soldier reported (and these are his words),

"It was really strange because nobody shot at 'em.  
And after they walked over the beam, suddenly all the fight was out of me.  
It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day.

It must have been that way for everybody,  
because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting." <sup>2</sup>

Both the Americans and the Vietcong – lethal adversaries in the heat of battle  
made room, let space be created between them – by a stranger in the form of the monks.

Surely a divine space was created that day.

Divine spaces can be out of step with what is expected from society. Sometimes, it seems, God's people are called to walk right through the field of fire, faithfully, sacrificially, loyally, doing what we have been called to do. The disciples whom Jesus was teaching at the time would be doing some of this.

Let's consider this an image of letting the divine have some space – and the courage it takes to create it (or in the story “walk the earthen beam”) which served as a welcoming space for the work of Spirit –  
a cup of cold water – monks in the rice paddies.

Are there ways this model can be active in your life – in your work, or civic involvement, or family?  
I bet you can find it or create it if you spend some time with it.

In some ways this is what we do in *Living the Questions* on Tuesday nights, the small group who comes together to know one another and to ask the real questions about living our faith today. Some evenings we seem to walk the path between the warring factions of our lives. We look for signs of the divine along the way.

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Three images having to do with what Jesus asked of us -  
feed the hungry, heal the sick, and remember that the divine needs some space to work.

The shoemaker and the angel is really to the point and reminds us that it is from deep roots that we are asked to welcome the stranger – that in welcoming the stranger – and sharing food - we may welcome God.

The healed femur reminds us that compassion is the first sign of civilization - and a sign of the work of Christ – in you and me. The injured one had to be received and given hospitality and the time and space to heal.

The monks in the rice paddies will hopefully help us create peaceful spaces where there is conflict – give us the courage to do it – for it is sacred hospitality.

*Cups of Cold Water* – based on Matthew 10:40-42  
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When Jesus told the disciples, “He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me,” he was telling them about all the connections we make as we live our lives – how those connections - receiving and welcoming others, and being welcomed and received – are opportunities God gives us. We don’t want to miss those opportunities.  
Be on the lookout for them.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Brett Blair

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ray, “When God Won’t Be Nice”