

“Final Instructions”

Sermon of the Rev. Dan Hatch
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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, June 29, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 10: 40-42

Text: “...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.” Matthew 10:42

Today’s three verses of text conclude the 10th chapter of Matthew. In Chapter 10, Jesus calls together his twelve disciples, and gives *them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and cure every disease and every sickness.* (Mt 10:1). Jesus sends them out equipped with nothing but the inner peace that comes from their faith with the instructions, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” After telling them, “See I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves,” and a few other reminders about what they are likely to encounter, Jesus sends them off with the final instructions you heard read in today’s scripture.

Today Jesus is still seeking to send out his disciples, you and me, *like sheep in the midst of wolves*, to bring good news to those who are hungry and thirsty for God’s kingdom, or as I prefer, kin-dom of love. So today’s final instructions are not just for those twelve disciples who followed their itinerate Rabbi around Galilee two thousand years ago, but for the hundreds of thousands of his followers around the world today, for the promised kin-dom has not yet come.

As context for hearing and understanding today’s final instructions, I need to ask you where are you on your journey of Christian discipleship today? We begin life as helpless infants programmed to receive unconditional love 24-7 in order to meet our needs for the necessities of life. At that point we have no conscious knowledge of God and our potential to be called as disciples of Christ. Gradually through parents, mentors, teachers we gain an awareness of some universal life-force that transcends the finite limitations of self and make a conscious decision through baptism or confirmation, to accept the responsibility for aligning our own life with the universal life-force we call God, and embrace God’s son, Christ Jesus, as our primary mentor and teacher.

We continue on this journey of faith to ever increasingly align our self with God, the source of life-giving inexhaustible Love through Christ Jesus, as long as God enables us to breath and allows our heart to beat. So where are you today on this journey? This is important because it will help you understand what is required of you.

In Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples 2000 years ago according to the Gospel of Matthew, he recognizes that his disciples will be perceived as bringing kin-dom gifts on this journey by those they meet, and identifies four different stages or levels of perception. Jesus presents these to his disciples in reverse order, beginning with the most advanced stage and ending with the first stage. Let us explore these together, noting that the emphasis is on the faith journey and perception of the one who receives the disciple, not on the disciples self-perception.

In verse 40 Jesus tells his disciples, *“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”* In this case, the one who welcomes you as a disciple perceives you to be an incarnation of Christ, (as many did Ethel Yim) and therefore an incarnate being of the fullness of God’s love. The one greeting you as that type disciple perceives you as both the presence of God and the presence of Christ. The one greeting you as such a disciple has not just come near the kin-dom of God, but has embraced it. This is the most advanced stage of faith that a disciple will encounter.

At the next level, the level of faith perception that is next closest to the advanced stage, Jesus says, *whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward...* At this level the one receiving you as a disciple perceives you as a prophet, one who proclaims the coming of the kin-dom. This person knows of the kin-dom, has not yet embraced the kin-dom, but is close to doing so. Who knows, you may be the one that enables that person to take the final step, and as such you will receive the reward of a prophet who knows that he or she has been instrumental in helping another to embrace the kin-dom—the fullness of God’s realm of love.

Those who are on the right path, struggling to be obedient to God’s will by seeking to follow the Ten Commandments and other “laws” of Christian faith, will perceive you as a righteous person, and you will receive the reward of a righteous person—the affirmation that you are an honest person trying to lead a Christ-like life.

At the entry level there will be those who are child-like in their faith. Jesus says of them, *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.*

No matter where we are on our life journey as one of Christ’s disciples, we have something to offer to those we encounter. What we have to offer will depend not so much on where we are on our faith journey as it will on the perception of those we encounter on the way. We cannot control others perception as that depends on where they are on their spiritual journey. So Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples, to you and me, is to go out on to the highways and byways of life, armed with just our faith and offer our peace to those we encounter. Some will perceive that we only have a cup of refreshing cup cool water to offer. Some will perceive that we are righteous persons, who have a set of laws we seek to adhere to that they would like to appropriate for themselves. Some will perceive us as a prophet who reassures them that God’s kin-dom of love is within their reach. Some will perceive us as Christ himself, and welcomes us, and welcome the God whom we serve into their life.

Whatever others perceive that we have to offer will be our reward as Christ’s disciples. However, it is not a reward to be sought; it is a grace to be received. As followers of Jesus we each have something to offer other as our kin-dom gifts. These we are to freely share, as the love of God from which they come has been shared with us. Such sharing will enable us to continue to grow in our faith, and to demonstrate to others Christ’s love as we know, understand and live it. If we do not share our faith with others, we are like a Bible that sits on a shelf and never gets opened. So then go on your way as lambs among wolves and experience the joy of following Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples; in so doing you will receive your appropriate reward.