FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*Life in the Water* Matthew 10:40-42

As you may have noticed: water often plays an important part of the story of Jesus. There is the water of baptism. Jesus also speaks about the living water that will quench your thirst so that you will never be thirsty again. Today, Jesus speaks of the way in which a *cold* cup of water can be a sign of generosity—a sign of empathy and relationship; a sign that we have been seen and heard, have had a space in a life open up before us and been received into it.

The short passage we heard are the last words Jesus speaks to the disciples before he sends them out to preach, heal the sick, cast out demons and generally convince everyone they meet that both the love and the judgment of God are a lot closer than they think.

He has been speaking to them for some time and has listed a lot of do’s and don’ts about their life on the road. The passage we heard is the last thing he shares, and it has to do with the kind of hospitality they may expect. So, he was not speaking to them.

Instead, Jesus turns his attention and speaks to the people the disciples were being sent out to minister among. Out of concern for the disciples’ welfare Jesus turned to the larger crowd and addressed *them*, as though they were surrogates for the whole population of Judea. He gives the larger population fair warning. For the ministry that will be offered among these people, Jesus expects something of them as well:

* *If you welcome me, you welcome God who sent me* [v. 40] (Jesus says);
* *If you welcome a prophet, you receive the prophet’s reward* [v. 41];
* *If you welcome a righteous person, you receive the same reward righteous people receive* [v. 41].

As one writer has observed: “there’s an ethic here of reciprocity. The disciples are going out to share the greatest gift in the world, the good news of salvation…Some people, they meet will spurn them, throwing the gift back in their faces. Others will accept it, but let it drop as soon as they move on, like handbills littering a city sidewalk.”

Some will receive the gift with true thankfulness. They will offer what they can in return—like a cup of cold water. *Cold* –mind you—not the tepid stuff in the water jar that has been sitting in the house most of the day. *Cold* water that someone has gone to the well and drawn-up, just for you.

Here, in the twenty-first century, we might not think much about a cup of *cold* water. But in Jesus’ day, it meant that someone went out of their way. It meant you had been received, not as a stranger, but as an honored guest.

We are not as formal or deliberate about such things these days, and so I wonder if we miss opportunities to offer and to receive people the way we once did. We are aware of strangers among us. Indeed, we seem to be hyper-aware of strangers. But, we do not seem to have the same kind of etiquette or code of behavior that can move one from being a stranger to being a friend.

This past week, I found myself wondering: in a setting like ours—a church—how can we overcome that and make more friends here in the community? To a large extent, we have answered that question with the partnerships into which we have entered. But is there something else we can do? In answer to that question, I would like to tell you a story of something that happened just a few days ago. Just recently, I had the occasion to experience just what it is like to move from stranger to guest. It was quite an experience.

Recently, our church responded to one of our neighbors who had concerns about the trees that grow on a strip of land we own on the other side of the stream. Our trees, it seems, are just outside their property. They told us about the extra work the trees caused when they dropped their leaves. They were especially worried that should another hurricane come, the trees might fall onto their property—possibly even their house.

Additionally, they were worried that the trees were dropping too much of their foliage into the stream. Again, in the event of a hurricane, or just a bad storm with lots of rain and run-off from the mountains, if our trees dropped a lot of leaves or branches or were up-rooted and swept into the stream, all of this could be disastrous for many of our neighbors.

In an effort to avoid all of these scenarios, we decided that those trees should be chopped down. This seemed a good and sensible idea and the work began two weekends ago.

Unfortunately, no sooner had the first part of the work begun than we were contacted by another neighbor who wondered what on earth we were doing chopping down those trees?!

This new set of neighbors were worried that, should there be a storm or a hurricane *without* the trees, the banks of the stream would erode and cause a major washing away of the bank, putting their property at risk. They worried about the debris left by chopping down the trees; that during another storm, a flood of water could cause the branches and tree trunks to become projectiles shooting across their yard and through the walls of the bottom floor of their house.

They reminded us of how, in 2016, Hurricane Darby (yes, the one I named my dog after) brought flooding into their backyard causing quite a bit of damage. And it littered the yard with debris from our trees.

Our neighbors were very concerned and very determined that their home be protected from more damage—especially since it could be avoided if we would just STOP what we were doing. The problem was: they did not know to whom to take their concerns. They called the church office, but for some reason we did not receive those calls. They did notice that the neighborhood board was meeting that Tuesday, June 20th. So, they decided to take the issue there.

On their way to neighborhood board meeting number 12, they took a chance and looked-up our church website where they found my cell phone number. At a little after 6:00PM that evening, as I was driving home from here, I got the call…and the story.

Actually, what I received was a very emphatic plea, an energetic petition that I listen to the concerns of this neighbor and their family…at some length.

To say I was a little “flummoxed” is putting it mildly. I was confused, concerned, and to be honest, I was also irritated to have all of this pouring into my ear at 40mph as I drove down the *Pali*. (I actually stopped at the Pauoa lookout to finish the conversation.)

When I got home, I electronically attended the neighborhood board meeting and listened to our neighbor’s report about our trees, and the discussion that ensued. As the week wore on—remember, that was Tuesday—I spoke with a couple of our church leaders about the situation. We agreed to halt the second part of the tree cutting and get more information.

Relieved, our neighbor asked us to come and look at our property from their property. They wanted us to see what they were concerned about, and they wanted further discussion about the trees and both our and their property.

So, I made an appointment with them for Friday afternoon, June 23rd. On that afternoon, three of us headed over to have a look. My expectation was that we would take a look at our property and theirs; reaffirm that our trees needed to come down; and return to business as usual.

…It did not happen quite that way.

Instead of simply trooping into the backyard of our neighbor’s property, we were welcomed into their home. From the living room, they have a good view of the stream, and our property, and where the trees had been. After a little while, one of the young men of the family took two of us down to the backyard. With my knee being the way it is, I stayed behind and was invited into the kitchen where a buffet of *pupus* had been laid out. It was Friday, so I thought they were expecting guests, and this made me eager to finish our appointment with them and leave.

I was surprised to learn that the food had been planned and prepared for *us*—for me and the two NCC members who went with me. Our neighbors had prepared food for three strangers with whom they no prior experience, nor any knowledge of our receptivity to their problem.

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, I sat in the kitchen, nibbled some really nice *pupus*, and got to know our neighbor. I listened to the story of the family and how they have lived there for many years—since the 1950s. I learned about the generations of their family who have lived on and loved the land and the neighborhood, and the neighbors.

…Suddenly, I was making a *visit*, not keeping an appointment for work. I was among people—like me and you—with a story and a history.

Instead of making an appointment with us, our neighbor prepared food and invited us into their home—they welcomed us. They showed us hospitality—which is to say: as brief as it was, they made a space in their lives for us. They took the time. They made an effort to make us comfortable and welcome. They offered us a cold cup of water.

Our business with them concerned the place where they make their home, where they have made their home for four generations, and so perhaps this is what influenced the way in which we were greeted and treated. All I know is that I came away from the visit with the distinct feeling that I had become a part of the Nu‘uanu community in a new and important way; a way I had not been before.

As far as the Scripture we heard this morning: Jesus the disciples’ tendency might be for them to focus on what they had to offer—their *business* with the subjects they encountered. Jesus encourages them to receive the people with grace—regardless of whether they are significant (prophets) or not (little ones).

He wanted to be sure that they saw the *people* they were going to move among and with whom they were ministering. Jesus was teaching them what it means to bring God’s spirit into the midst of the connections they will be making. It means recognizing people for who they are—their personhood—and receiving them with compassion.

The cold cup of water becomes a way of thinking about the way in which we can make a space for people in our lives, and how it can change the dynamic and move both parties away from being strangers to each other. A cold cup of water becomes a space where we can meet and really see one another; share our stories, and to get an understanding of people are and how we might live together with confidence and trust.

The bad news is that this often takes time and a willingness to listen and learn of more than our own needs. It requires the gift of patience, and as someone once wrote: ‘so many gifts in this world, are given according to the ordinary calculus of human values. They’re merely a positive re-statement of the ancient criminal code, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” You take care of me, I take care of you. You scratch my back, I scratch yours. You do something that's deserving, and you'll get back only what you deserve.’

The good news is that a cold cup of water can make a difference. And that that living a faithful and complete life is all about those trips to the well to fill up that cup with cold water—not for ourselves, but to give to somebody else.

I am still contemplating how and how often I can go to the well and make more space in my life for others. What I would like to invite you to meditate on is how we can, as Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, do the same here in this place, together among our neighbors.

As we pray and meditate on this, may our hearts remember and give thanks for the cups of water we have received. Amen.