

'A CUP OF COLD WATER' IMMIGRATION & HOSPITALITY

PROPER 8, YEAR A

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 22:1-14 Jeremiah 28:5-9 Psalm 13 Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Matthew 10:40-42 Romans 6:12-23

Focus Text: Matthew 10:40-42

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever 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; ⁴² and 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."

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

Leviticus 19:33-34

You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 24:22

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

"Then the [Lord] will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by [God], inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

Matthew 25:34-45

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Romans 12:9-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Hebrews 13:1-2

* This word is also translated as "stranger," "sojourner," "foreigner," or "immigrant."

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY CHRIS LIU BEERS, PROGRAM ASSOCIATE,
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As is often the case, the lectionary reading from Matthew today is just a small part of a much larger whole. When Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me...” he is addressing the twelve disciples, commissioning them to proclaim the good news and embody the new kingdom among the towns and villages dotting the ancient landscape of the Holy Land. Earlier in Chapter 10, Jesus indicates that the disciples’ mission will hinge on the *hospitality* of others: “You received without payment, give without payment.... Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave.... If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town” (Matt. 10:8, 11, 14). In most ancient cultures – and in many contemporary ones, though not in the U.S. – hospitality is not only a virtue but is deeply fundamental to society itself. That is to say that without the practices of hospitality, society itself would come unglued. In her insightful book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine Pohl says that “Hospitality was viewed as a pillar on which all morality rested; it encompassed ‘the good.’ ...Early Christian writers claimed that transcending social and ethnic differences by sharing meals, homes and worship with persons of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith” (p. 5). Understanding the vitality of ancient hospitality opens new windows of understanding into the message of Jesus throughout the book of Matthew.

In our passage, Jesus draws on several different images to demonstrate what hospitality, what *welcoming*, might look like. While in Matthew 25 he famously says, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me,” here Jesus invokes the “prophet,” the “righteous person,” and the “little one.” His point is that when people welcome others through the practices of hospitality – especially those who may not be well-regarded by society (strangers, prophets and children) – they are opening themselves to receive the gifts of God, the “reward of the righteous.” The image that Jesus chooses to convey a truly warm welcome is that of offering “a cup of cold water.” Water was (and is) a precious resource in the Middle East. Throughout the Bible, various authors make the point that water comes from God (e.g. Deut. 11:8-17); this uniquely life-sustaining gift is beyond humanity’s ability to conjure or create. Thus, in offering a cup of water to another, a person acknowledges that what they have is none other than a gift from God. Water is not his or her own possession to hoard at the expense of the thirsty one knocking on the door.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew, careful readers find themselves called to imitate the welcoming spirit of Jesus, who says in chapter 19, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” As modern readers of this ancient text, we must learn to open ourselves to the possibility that we do not always stand in the shoes of the disciples, sent out to preach the kingdom; sometimes we may find that our primary calling is to put a radical hospitality into practice, welcoming the stranger, the child, the prophet, with a cup of cold water and an open heart.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY DR. MARIA TERESA PALMER, DIRECTOR
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In the tenth chapter, Matthew highlights the importance of hospitality among the faithful. It took courage and commitment for the persecuted Christian community of the First Century to offer hospitality to prophets and preachers, so Matthew reminds his readers that they are ministering to Jesus himself in welcoming his disciples and brothers and sisters in the faith who might come from unknown places. The verses before our focus passage give us an idea of why this might be such risky business. V 34: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers...”

As a mother, and even as a pastor, I want to forget the context and move quickly to verse 40 to talk about the joy of Christian fellowship, but this doesn't do justice to the text, especially when we read this passage in light of the topic of immigration. Offering Christian hospitality to the immigrants among us is about as controversial today as welcoming a Christian prophet was under Roman rule. I performed a marriage in the home of an Anglo middle-class family whose daughter was marrying a young Hispanic man. It was a small ceremony, due to the lack of approval of their church and family. The parents had to choose between welcoming their new son-in-law and enjoying the fellowship of their extended family and Christian community. I know of six churches in North Carolina where the result of ministering to immigrants has cost the pastors their jobs, split the congregation or divided families. I also have a colleague, pastor of a thriving Hispanic ministry, who has been asked to find another home for his congregation because the mother church doesn't want to “inadvertently aid illegals.”

If I had not lived it through many years of ministry, I wouldn't believe that church people could behave so unwelcomingly. But of course many other groups have known this truth for decades: the church can be very un-Christ-like.

Perhaps, in some congregations, it's more a sin of omission: we don't notice the "alien" among us and forget to be hospitable. We forget to be intentional about our welcome. But the message we present to the foreign visitor is clearly conveyed by how we behave when a newcomer ventures into our congregations: We demand that they adopt our cultural norms – fill out the contact forms, keep their kids quiet and off our new carpet, learn our language and our hymns, pledge allegiance to the flag, volunteer for VBS, contribute to the capital campaign – and then maybe they can earn that glass of water.

The cup of water that Matthew asks us to offer is a dangerous thing. It assumes we have looked at our visitor and noticed his or her thirst. We are willing to be inconvenienced, to go to the well and draw the pure clean water and offer it in hospitality – which might lead us to pulling out a chair and inquiring about the rest of the family. It might lead to prayer, to phone calls and being drawn into this person's life. It could lead to learning about his or her fears and hopes and we might find ourselves praying with Solomon: "God, when a foreigner comes to this place because of your great name... listen to his prayer." And what then? If God responded to all those prayers, we might have to change our immigration laws, our foreign policy...

The US government, regardless of many politicians' claims to the contrary, does not hold itself to biblical standards of behavior. Leviticus 24:22 clearly calls us to have "one law for the alien and for the citizen," but our courts have said that labor protection laws do not apply to aliens. The courts interpret what is right or wrong in light of existing (and ever-changing) legislation dictated by the political climate. The Christian church, however, is not free to decide what biblical teachings are expedient. All through the Old Testament the prophets call us to treat the alien/foreigner with justice and compassion. Jesus calls us to treat foreigners with the concern and love we would show him. Throughout the New Testament we are reminded to show hospitality to the stranger, to help meet the basic needs of those who are new and needy among us: to notice their thirst, their loneliness and their need for Christian fellowship; to respond to their arrival as if Christ himself were at our door. May God give us the courage to be the first ones to set up the welcome table and pour the water.

WORSHIP AID - 'A CUP OF COLD WATER'

RESPONSIVE READING

As we come together in prayer, let us remember the word of God, who instructs us to "love the stranger who dwells among you for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (*Deuteronomy 10:19*).

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For all those who have come fleeing oppression and persecution – black, white, brown and yellow:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come fleeing hardship and hunger:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come to join loved ones already here:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come seeking freedom and opportunity:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

Let us remember the words of Christ, who said "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (*Matthew 25: 33*).

When, Lord, were you a stranger that we welcomed among us?

"Truly, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (*Matthew 25:40*).

When we welcomed the stranger, we welcomed you, Christ Jesus, in our midst!

Loving God, you call us to create hospitable communities. Help us to overcome any fear and anxiety we may have of those who come from other lands to live among us. Give us the courage and wisdom to create compassionate and just immigration policies. Grant that we may all live together in peace and love. **Amen.**

(adapted from Interfaith Worker Justice, "Immigration Litany," www.iwj.org/pdf/imm-litany.pdf)

For the World and Its Peoples

O God, you are the hope of all the ends of the earth,
the God of the spirits of all flesh.

Hear our humble intercession for all races and families on earth,
that you will turn all hearts to yourself.

Remove from our minds hatred, prejudice, and contempt
for those who are not of our own race or color, class or creed,
that departing from everything that estranges and divides,
we may by you be brought into unity of spirit, in the bond of peace. Amen.

(United Methodist Book of Worship, p. 524)

A Prayer for Neighbor

We thank you, God, for coming to us as a neighbor, a stranger, an immigrant,
binding our wounds and carrying us to safety,
so that we might love you with all our heart, soul and mind,
and welcome the stranger, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

(Adapted from "Short Preface," www.laughingbird.net/LectureTexts/CP10.html)

A Prayer for Immigrants

Our God, you have given us in your word the stories of persons who needed to leave their homelands—
Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, Moses. Help us to remember that when we speak of immigrants and refugees, we speak of Christ.
In the One who had no place to lay his head, and in the least of his brothers and sisters, you come to us again, a stranger
seeking refuge. We confess that we often turn away. You have chosen that the life of Jesus be filled with events of un-
planned travel and flight from enemies. You have shown us through the modeling of Jesus how we are called to relate to
persons from different nations and cultures. You have called us to be teachers of your word. We ask you, our God, to
open our minds and hearts to the challenge and invitation to model your perfect example of love. **Amen.**

(adapted from Justice for Immigrants, "Prayer and Liturgy Suggestions," www.justiceforimmigrants.org/ParishKit/LiturgyPrayerSuggestions.pdf)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

▫ QUOTES ▫

Our borders and immigration system, including law enforcement, ought to send a message of welcome, tolerance, and justice to members of immigrant communities in the United States and in their countries of origin. We should reach out to immigrant communities. Good immigration services are one way of doing so that is valuable in every way – including intelligence.

Final Report of the "9/11 Commission"

The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

Bishop Roger Mahoney

Since its founding, the United States has received immigrants from around the world who have found opportunity and safe haven in a new land. The labor, values, and beliefs of immigrants from throughout the world have transformed the United States from a loose group of colonies into one of the leading democracies in the world today. From its founding to the present, the United States remains a nation of immigrants grounded in the firm belief that newcomers offer new energy, hope and cultural diversity. Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving.

Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the U.S.