

Drink This Cup

Matthew 10:40-42

Whitefish UMC

June 29, 2008

- † So many feet—little, big, and in-between—have walked over the mat out front of the church that we don't even notice it anymore. But there was a time that the purchase of that doormat caused some raised eyebrows and heated discussion.
- † Do you remember what that mat says? That's right, it proclaims "Welcome" in big, bold letters. But what else does it say? (Open hearts, open minds, open doors...)
- † Yes, that's the official slogan of the United Methodist Church's "Igniting Ministries" program—a program meant to encourage people who are seeking a place where they can explore matters of faith in a safe, affirming place to come to the United Methodist Church.
- † Sure, it's a nice slogan, but what does it mean when we try to put it into real and practical effect? Just how welcome are people who disagree with us, who don't look like us, who don't have the same level of education, who struggle with addictions, mental health issues, who don't know where they fit?
- † Welcome. It's such a simple word, and we use it all the time. "You're welcome," we say, without even thinking about it. We say it all the time here at church, too. But a few years ago, our church had to figure out just what we really mean when we say "welcome."
- † Some people didn't think we should welcome all people, and when we continued to do so, they left the church. That was a painful time for a

- lot of us. One couple, disgusted that there were a few too many people who didn't look like or agree with them, stormed out one day.
- † Their last words, thrown over their shoulders in anger and frustration, were: “The problem with you people is that you let anybody in here!”
 - † Lest you think that this is only a contemporary issue, look back at today's scripture passage from Matthew's gospel and know that it also plagued the followers of Jesus in the first century, too.
 - † The earliest churches met an abundance of traveling preachers and their followers, according to Professor Greg Carey of Lancaster Theological Seminary. Who should they welcome, and who should they send away? Should they only invite and encourage those who offered the “true” religion, or should they welcome everyone?
 - † Jesus' answer is fairly clear: you ought to err on the side of welcoming even those you're not so sure about, for when you do, it's as if you were to welcome me.
 - † But that's a hard thing to do. Scientists seem to say that we are hard-wired to notice difference and to guard against it—a throwback to our caveman and woman days. But Jesus asks us to re-boot our hard drive and act in a new way.
 - † There is so much polarization these days over religion and who is right and who is wrong and who is the true Christian. In his book *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor tells about a church that split into two factions over some minor points of doctrine.
 - † One dispute had to do with showing hospitality in this case, whether or not it was right to show hospitality to those in error concerning church doctrine. They called this dispute, interestingly enough, the “Cup of Cold Water Debate.”

- † One of the leaders of the church, Uncle Al, decided to try to make peace between the warring factions. He chose Brother Fields to help him. Brother Fields had never shown hospitality to anyone, whether they were in error or not, so he seemed perfect for the task.
- † They all arrived one Sunday for Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken. The grace before the meal posed a problem. Church members were sometimes known to use prayer to beat other people over the head, so Uncle Al suggested a silent prayer.
- † This was an excellent idea except that it soon turned into a contest to see who could pray silently the longest. Brother Miller, leader of one faction, snuck a glance at Brother Johnson, leader of the other faction. Brother Johnson showed no sign that he was done with his prayer, so Brother Miller dove back down for some more prayer, too.
- † No one would come up for air, because it might look as if they wanted to eat more than they wanted to pray. It was becoming the longest table grace in history. It ground on and on and on.
- † Then without waiting for the men to finish their contest, good, practical Aunt Flo slid her chair back, rose, went to the kitchen, and brought out the food that they were both competing to see who could be the most thankful for.
- † Tears streamed down Brother Johnson's face; Brother Miller was weeping, too. The smell of fried chicken and gravy caused their hearts to melt. They raised their heads and filled their plates and slowly made peace over that glorious chicken.
- † A cup of cold water. Homemade fried chicken and gravy. Doesn't matter what it is, really. But there is something about hospitality that

- helps us bridge our differences and remember that we all belong to God, even if we disagree.
- † In Old and New Testament times, a person's level of hospitality to strangers indicated the extent of their faithfulness to God—it was that simple. The stranger was like a brother or sister. The visitor had a place of honor. Water was in short supply, and in rural areas especially.
 - † Women usually carried large jars on their heads to the well twice a day; once early in the morning and again in the evening. There was no refrigeration, so cold water could not stay cold for very long. So to give a cup of cold water was a luxury. It would indicate a high level of Mid-eastern hospitality.
 - † Middle-eastern hospitality puts ours to shame. An American journalist named Afshin Molavi traveled through Iran a few years ago gathering information for a magazine article on the changes that are sweeping that country.
 - † The fear of terrorism causes us to view Iranians with suspicion, but Molavi reports that the Iranian people he met were gracious and welcoming. The Iranians are famous for their hospitality to strangers. When Molavi mentioned to his taxi driver that we would love a cup of the fresh pomegranate juice sold by the local street vendors (who wouldn't??), the driver sped him to the nearest juice stand and insisted on buying him a cup.
 - † The juice vendor, recognizing that Molavi was a visitor to his country, insisted on paying for the juice himself. So for the next few minutes, Molavi, the juice vendor, and the taxi driver all had a friendly argument over who would have the pleasure of buying his

pomegranate juice. Our friends the Neffs, who have also recently visited Iran, report similar incidents.

- † If you've read Greg Mortensen's *Three Cups of Tea* or heard him speak, you know that hospitality played a significant role in bridging the differences among the Afghan tribal leaders and himself so that schools could be built and girls could be educated while still respecting each other's traditions.
- † It was Jesus' expectation that his disciples would be hospitable. "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."
- † This last week we've had lots of opportunities to offer hospitality, and it hasn't always been easy. Our facilities were strained with welcoming around 140 little ones and 50 adults to Vacation Bible School. We broke a toilet flushing mechanism. We bent a tent pole or two. The preschool and daycare teachers had to adapt a lot.
- † Then right in the middle, we held Ruth Hill's memorial service. The VBS sets had to come down, the sanctuary had to be reassembled for the service, and then it had to be taken down so the VBS sets could go back up. We welcomed around 300 people for Ruth's service.
- † As someone remarked, it was quite a diverse congregation assembled in honor of Ruth. There were teachers and well-heeled parents of students for whom Ruth had made a special difference. There were folks from the bar crowd, from AA groups, and from the tight-knit community of Olney. Someone left a logging truck running in the parking lot during the service.

- † We put out a special call for food, money, and helpers for the service. Dianne Grove reports that she had more offers for help and food than she could use. It took a major effort to make it all work, but you did it with grace and love.
- † I have to confess that this week there have been times that I have not agreed with the theology of all the songs or skits or games of VBS. There were things about how some folks chose to honor Ruth that drove me crazy and made me mad. But I kept remembering this passage that I was going to preach on today.
- † One of the churches that joined us in VBS this year doesn't believe that women should be pastors. Their pastor wasn't in evidence at all this week. But I kept remembering this passage.
- † In the midst of the week, James Dobson of Focus on the Family trashed Barack Obama's faith as being a distortion of true Christianity. As both John McCain and Barack Obama have learned all too painfully, the pastors who endorse both of them can get them into a lot of trouble as the suitability of their faith and its "truth" raises questions in the media.
- † Don't you wonder what Jesus would say to all of this? I think he would say, "Don't focus on your differences, but instead find what you can agree on and join hands and do it."
- † In other words, offer welcome to the stranger—whether they are like you or not.
- † One day last week at VBS, in Shawn's Mission Room, we talked with Stephanie from Intermountain Children's Home. She asked, "How can you show someone that you care for them?" The kids answered, "be nice, help, forgive." Those were all good answers.

† But I especially liked what Elizabeth, in preschool, said—without even using words at first. She just grinned in a big stagy sort of way.

“That’s right,” said Stephanie, “you can smile at someone.”

Elizabeth, who almost never talks here at church then let the words tumble out.

† “I like to laugh together with my mom.” And we all laughed together with Elizabeth. And I thought, wouldn’t Jesus like it if we, too, laughed and cried and shared a cup of water, pomegranate juice, or better yet the cup of blessing of the sweet communion that we share in his name?

† What a week of hospitality this has been at Whitefish United Methodist Church. The welcome mat has been well trod, and many cups of cold water and the laughter of love—as well as the tears--have been offered in Jesus name. Thank you, church. And thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

Prof. Greg Carey, “Commentary on Gospel,”

<http://www.workingpreacher.org>

King Duncan, “What’s Your Hospitality Quotient?” www.sermons.com

(Garrison Keillor story cited in this article)