

Pentecost 6 2008 [PR 8]

Matt. 10:40-42 “Is A Cup of Cold Water Enough?”

The season of Pentecost is the time when the texts point us to what it means to be the church, the followers of Jesus. Down thru history Xians have debated this question. Some have leaned toward issues of social justice as the mark of true discipleship while others have advocated personal piety as the goal of discipleship. Both positions have value, both have legitimate concerns and both, when pursued to an extreme, drive the church into the ditch. The problem we have with practicing ethical decision making is that there is seldom a clear difference between good and evil. If every decision came down to a simple and clear choice then our decisions would be easy. But more often the choices we face in being disciples is the choice between two good things or between the lesser of two evils. (Philip Pfatteicher, , The Year of Matthew, Pentecost 1, p. 45, Lectionary Bible Studies, Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

Let’s look at these two common options for discipleship. First, the social justice model. It is easy for the church to say and for pastors to advocate peace and justice from the pulpit. Talk is cheap. It is much more complicated to work out what is just in any human conflict and if one is to avoid being a hypocrite it will cost you something to act on your professed beliefs. Peace and justice are important issues. However, one person’s justice can be another person’s oppression.

Illus. I received a letter this week from a peace and justice advocacy group in the synod. Let me quote: “We write to introduce you to the newest ministry of being “An Advocating Congregation”. An “Advocating Congregation” is intended as a way for congregations to realize their role as people of faith not only in the public sphere, but also as proponents of justice and peace in our churches.... We hope to establish partnership with your congregation in advocating for all creation.” (Letter from Paul Benz, Lutheran. Public Policy Office, June 15, 2008). Advocacy is defined in the letter as, “pleading the cause of those suffering injustice.” This advocacy is aimed at “people who are marginalized, impoverished or oppressed.”

Sounds good. Sounds like something Christian people should be doing. But I see a ditch here. For whom shall we advocate? One person’s “justice” is another person’s “oppression”. For example, while claiming to lift up “diversity” in the church this letter calls for the church to be of one mind and

one voice on complex issues of economics, justice, poverty, and marginalization. What if you disagree with a position this group wishes to take on some issue? Are you not then automatically “marginalized”. What happened to “diversity” and “tolerance” as marks of “justice”? And should the church, can the church, as an institution, speak for all its members on social policy? Should pastors or bishops speak for you in the public square?

But then there’s the other ditch. What about personal piety as the mark of true discipleship? Is what you do as a Christian so private that no one knows what you believe? Some Xians practice a faith that is so private it never sees the light of day in the “real world”. In polite company it is best not to talk about religion or politics. My father had a saying about being too quiet. He said, “Silence may be golden, but sometimes it’s just plain yellow.” Is being Christian only about coming to church to hear uplifting stories that help you feel closer to God? Is being a Christian a matter of piling up the blessings of God because you “believe”? But what do people believe in? In the news this week there was a report on a nationwide survey of what Americans believe. Seventy per cent of those affiliated with a religion believe many religions, not just their own, can lead to eternal salvation. Things haven’t changed much since the time of Jesus.

The early church met an abundance of traveling preachers who preached very different messages. This created a major discernment issue for the church. Paul's correspondence with churches in Corinth, Galatia, and Philippi reflect conflicting agendas among these traveling preachers. (Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament, Lancaster Theological Seminary in [Working Preacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org) 6-29-08)

In our day the question of authentic ministry remains ever present. We are called to discern. Jesus said, in the gospel text for today, that “**whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will receive their reward.**” Ministry as small and insignificant as giving a cup of cold water will not go unnoticed. But does that mean that ministries that are more high profile, more spectacular, more public will be rewarded with higher honors? Not necessarily. Philip Pfatteicher, writing on this text comments, “**The concluding promise of this passage stresses the value of simple actions. The church needs the twelve, shining examples of holiness, brilliant teachers, powerful preachers, those whose names we all know. But that is not all. The church also depends on those who by more ordinary actions...make their contribution... and ... Both kinds of service – the spectacular and the**

ordinary the notable and the unnoticed – are of equal value in the sight of God.” (ibid., Pfatteicher. p. 48).

What is important is to remember that the mission of the church is to focus on what God has done, not on what we are doing. God cares more about the mission of the gospel, the good news of redemption in Christ, than about any other program in history. We are called to be part of spreading that good news. Jesus reminds us that even the smallest attempt to spread the good news of the gospel will result in divine appreciation and assistance. We will not create a perfect, just, peaceful world, not as long as sinners inhabit the globe. That does not mean that Xians stop being involved in things that make for peace and justice but it also doesn't mean that we can turn the church into a society for peace and justice. If all the church is about is doing social ministry then Xianity loses its distinct witness. The call to be a winsome witness to Jesus is the call to proclaim the theology of redemption, not a theology of divine acceptance.

In the same way, we cannot excuse ourselves from involvement with the neighbor by saying that “my faith is my faith, and your faith is your faith.” Discipleship is not just a private matter any more than ministry is just a peace and justice matter. We are called to both and to find a balance between them that energizes our discipleship by an ongoing nurture of our faith. A more modest proposal, less flashy to be sure, and less glamorous is to live a better life as a parent, spouse or neighbor. Doing justice begins at home. Being faithful begins at home as you teach your children and practice forgiveness, as God has forgiven you, love, as God has loved you, & mercy, as God has had mercy on you.

The gospel is about what God has done for you through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God does not just “accept us” or “tolerate us” or even just “love us”. No, God in Christ has redeemed us from sin, death and the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood, his innocent suffering and death.” (M. Luther, Third Article, Small Catechism).

The church is the community of disciples who are called for a particular purpose, namely to bear witness to our salvation given to us in Christ Jesus. Our witness to the world is to call people to believe and trust in this once-for-all action of God. We trust, not in a God who “accepts us unconditionally” but in a God who has “redeemed us unconditionally” in Christ Jesus.

For those of us who have grown up in Xian homes, attended Sunday School and church all our lives, it is easy to take all this for granted. Just like a cup of cold water can be taken for granted. But for a person who is confused about religion, this word takes on incredible significance and power. Hearing the gospel sets you free from attempts to make yourself acceptable to God either through rigid obedience to laws or by remaking the Xian faith according to your own tastes.

You and I are called to be winsome witnesses to this freedom we have in Christ. You have been redeemed in Christ Jesus. You are set free from your bondage to sin and death. This redemption from sin gives you courage to live as a free child of God. Jesus says that those who share this good news with others will receive a great reward, the gift (not the wage – the gift) of everlasting life! Thanks be to God. Amen.