

Sermon
July 2, 2023
Matthew 10:40-42
Jesus in Disguise

Lord, give me the confidence in the power of your Gospel. Grant me clarity in understanding and proclaiming the truths of your Word.

Good Morning to all present, and a shout out to those participating in today's worship from home.

Today's Gospel contains the truth about hospitality, service, and the importance of recognizing and welcoming God's messengers. Jesus reminds us that when we receive those who are sent by Him, we are receiving Him and the Father who sent Him. It is a reminder that our hospitality and acceptance of others should be rooted in our love for Christ.

So, who are God's messengers? They could be anyone, even the least among us.

This Gospel reading always reminds me of Sister Mary Beth, and Sister Dalmatia, Dominican nuns who taught me in grammar school. Both were fast friends and friends of my parents, frequent visitors at our house on many Saturday afternoons for chit chat and gin and tonics. They both believed and told me many times that Jesus could be disguised as any stranger we meet, and to treat them accordingly.

As a six year-old, in preparation for my fist Communion, this was quite a concept, a 24-7 test of how my interactions with others would determine my wait time to enter heaven.

I was convinced that my biggest test was when, one day, my mother and I walked to Saks Fifth Avenue. In front of the store at the northeast corner, was a man selling pencils. His sign said he had lost his legs. And he was on a board with wheels, pushing himself with his hands. Seemed legit to me. When I asked if we could buy a pencil from him, my mother told me he was faking it. I said, "if he is faking it, where are his legs?" Her response to this was to hold my hand tightly and whisk me into the store. The rest of the day and night, I felt so guilty that I passed him by. Our eyes met, and I felt his disappointment at my passing him by. My prayer that night was a promise that, if I were to see him again, I would help. The next time I passed him in front of Saks (I soon realized he was a fixture there), I was prepared with a dollar and gave it to him. When I spoke with Sister Mary Beth about it, to reconcile my action with my mother's anger over it, if I had done the right thing, she said that one could never be faulted for being kind. I have carried that idea with me throughout my life and always help out those I run into on the street whether their need is genuine or not. However, for all those who beg, you have to wonder about the dearth of opportunities for them that drive them to such a livelihood. Kindness and empathy are shield and banner, protecting you from self absorption and announcing to the world how God wants us to behave.

The reward Jesus talks about in this reading comes from doing the work of God himself when we open our hearts to others, offering hospitality. Hospitality requires empathy to be truly hospitable. To walk around in someone's shoes.

What is it to be empathetic? I defer to Edna St. Vincent Millay in one of my favorite poems, *Renascence*. This poem, written in 1912, broadly encompasses the relationship of an individual to humanity and nature. The following stanzas speak of the dissolution of the boundary between self and world, the ultimate form of empathy:

All sin was of my sinning, all
Atoning mine, and mine the gall
Of all regret. Mine was the weight
Of every brooded wrong, the hate
That stood behind each envious thrust,
Mine every greed, mine every lust.

And all the while for every grief,
Each suffering, I craved relief
With individual desire,—
Craved all in vain! And felt fierce fire
About a thousand people crawl;
Perished with each, — then mourned for all!

A man was starving in Capri;
He moved his eyes and looked at me;
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,
And knew his hunger as my own.
I saw at sea a great fog bank
Between two ships that struck and sank;
A thousand screams the heavens smote;
And every scream tore through my throat.

No hurt I did not feel, no death
That was not mine; mine each last breath
That, crying, met an answering cry
From the compassion that was I.
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;
Mine, pity like the pity of God.

It is easy to be numb to others, to become focused on our own lives, our own needs, our own desires. Jesus asks us to step out of our comfort zones and extend kindness and compassion to those around us. After all, it was Jesus who took the ultimate step out of his comfort zone in leaving Heaven to become man, opening himself up to suffering and death in order to show mankind the path to salvation. What he asks us to do requires so much less.

No act of service is too insignificant in God's eyes, be it words of encouragement, offering a helping hand, volunteering, or simply showing kindness. These actions can have a lasting, positive impact on others. I am reminded of the phrase, "Paying it Forward", the rippling effect of human kindness.

Our challenge this week and going forward is to open our hearts to receive those whom God sends our way. To be a welcoming community that embraces and supports one another, regardless of our differences, knowing that accepting others means accepting Christ. Get out of your comfort zone to help others in need, no matter how uncomfortable their presence may make you feel. Your kindness to them will help you get over your initial reticence. Specifically, there is a CT Homeless Ministry that has recently been formed. Please see me after the service if you want more information.

We are charged to cultivate a spirit of hospitality and service, to be attentive to the small opportunities to extend kindness. We should do this with humility as our acts of service are not for our own recognition but for the glory of God.

We must always ask ourselves, are we living as hospitable and welcoming disciples of Christ? Are we actively seeking to receive and embrace those whom God sends our way? Would others identify us as Christians by our actions? As Sisters Mary Beth and Dalmatia believed, will you meet Christ today? How will you treat him?

Amen.

Laura Daly, Licensed Lay Preacher