

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (a)**  
**Jeremiah 28:5-9   Romans 6:12-23   Matthew 10:40-42**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**June 28, 2020 (Traditional)**

In Matthew chapter 10 Jesus sends his disciples out on a kind of training mission. They are to go out to the towns and villages of Israel and announce that the kingdom of God has arrived. And he tells them right off the bat, they're going to meet with both acceptance, and rejection. "If people welcome you," he says, "great. If they reject you, just move on. You've done your job. You've gotten a clear response from people: "yes" or "no." Jesus encourages a clear "yes" or "no" response to the proclamation "Jesus is Lord." He wants people to have clarity about who they serve...about what they worship and put their hope in. He wants us to be able to articulate, to speak openly about our deepest loyalties. When we are unclear or mushy or lukewarm about who we serve, and who we worship, it probably means we're stuck in our selves. From my experience, I've noticed that when I keep putting decisions off, when I resist answering people clearly about what my convictions and thoughts and feelings are—it's usually because I'm trying to control everything. I'm basically worshiping myself, as if I can encompass all things, as if I can comprehend all the angles of every situation before committing, before acting, deciding, and moving. So it's not surprising, I get trapped in lukewarmness and indecision.

It's funny, how the more I become god of my own life, the more helpless and indecisive I feel. Jesus tells us to go out into the world and get people to give a clear response to his claim: Jesus is Lord, the Kingdom of God has arrived. God would actually rather have people say a clear "no" to that claim than stay lukewarm and indecisive, trapped in the god of self. The Holy Spirit would rather work with strong rejection than with Jello.

That has always been so encouraging to me. People are going to be divided in their response to Jesus. It's not my job to control all the angles and argue them into the correct response, as if I have power over outcomes. When we face rejection, we move on with confidence. All we can do is proclaim that he is Lord, and lovingly, graciously, introduce people to him. That keeps us focused on our first job as the church: it's to introduce a new generation to Jesus. When we forget that, if we start putting other things before missionary outreach to the next generation, the church stagnates, turns inward, becomes another country club.

Another big temptation is to think everyone out there must know about Jesus already. After all, we figure, everyone has a ton of information about him at their fingertips. They can just google him. It's all out there for them to explore. We've got to remember that all that information, all that data, means nothing without flesh and blood human beings out there in the world witnessing faithfully to Jesus, directly, person to person, in the power of the Holy Spirit. All that information out there at people's fingertips has very little power, until the Spirit uses people like you and me to convey it to others in love.

Today's gospel helps us think about first impressions. The first impression that you make on people as a believer is obviously very important. My wife Karen is a hospital chaplain and a lot of times, she has about five minutes to represent Jesus to people. Something unique about

Christianity among world religions is that you can't separate the gospel of Jesus from the flesh and blood people who bear it. The gospel of Jesus isn't just an abstract message, it's not just data: the Word brings the power of the Holy Spirit with it, it's a living breathing message borne by living, breathing human beings. Jesus says that when people welcome his disciples, they're welcoming God himself. So yes, we should think self-critically about the first impressions we're making, because often we've got only five minutes to convey who we worship. It's important to honestly ask ourselves, "how am I representing God to other people?" How does the package match the gift? Am I straightforward, honest, loving, helpful...do I give people my full attention? Do I give them a chance, do I give them my time, do I listen to them? Am I a welcoming person? (Welcoming is the key word in today's gospel lesson). Or, am I standoffish, scared of what people might think of me? Am I embarrassed about my Christian convictions? Snooty? Dismissive, superior, defensive, judgmental? Do I subtly make myself the focus when I talk to people?

The gift of the gospel is inseparable from the package in which it arrives. The package is you and me. The last thing Jesus wants is for us to be all self-conscious and worried about it. That's one purpose of the church: this is where we receive training in discipleship. Here's where we gain the confidence to put our personal fears and self-consciousness behind us and witness to Jesus joyfully and openly.

To use a helpful analogy: As disciples of Jesus, we're like professional musicians. We don't compose the symphony. God has composed it. And he's always revealing new depths, new variations, in the beautiful saving work he's composed for us in Christ. All you and I can do is practice on the instrument he's given each of us...with our unique abilities and limitations. We can practice, we can get ourselves to the rehearsals and we can choose to take part in the performance of the symphony. And of course, when we encounter a new section of the music, that's unfamiliar to us, we're going to stumble and make mistakes and question our own abilities. But the more we play, the more confident we become, the more God's music becomes part of us. When that happens, the people listening to the symphony stop focusing on us so much...the members of the orchestra. What they hear and experience is the music itself—straight from the composer's soul. It's a helpful image of the church: it's a full public performance of God's saving symphony in Jesus Christ. And at the same time, a lot of what we do at church is all about rehearsal and practice.

In the gospel, Jesus talks about handing a cup of cold, refreshing water to what he calls "the little ones." The refreshment we offer to people as disciples flows out from Jesus himself, and that cup stands for all the different ways the Spirit can reach people through us. On a side note, it's good to ask how and where *we ourselves* are receiving Christ's lifegiving water today. Are we worshipping with his people? Are we studying his Word together? (Are we rehearsing with the orchestra?) Where are we getting refreshed and renewed in the Spirit? Where do we get practical training, to speak the name of the One who gives us life with confidence? It's a truth of our creaturely reality: we cannot give what we have not received.

I think of all the living water that I've seen being shared generously at St. John's since I've come here. New members have come into our congregation searching for a spiritual home...all sorts of different needs bring them through our doors. But I know what makes them

stay...it's you all. It's those of you who welcome those new people in our midst with open arms. It's our youth directors who are completely there, body and soul, for our young people. It's our worship leaders and readers and greeters and ushers and altar guild who pour love and care into what they're doing. It's members handing out those small cups of cold water to each traveler. They know from the first impression they get, that we are drawing out of a deep, unending well of life-giving water here.

You see the refreshing water in the love that people share with other congregation members who are going through hard times; the invitations to come to worship, to join God's orchestra, to come on our mission trips, to come join our women's groups, our choirs, our bible studies.

The world is full of rage and passion and conflict right now: but that's not a signal to close inward on ourselves. It's just God reminding us how thirsty the world is. We see the brokenness, we hear the clashing voices, but through it all God is just helping us see more clearly how beautiful the symphony is, that he has composed for the world in Christ. In all the conflict, we see all the new ways we can share the resurrection music of Christ with people out there in the world.

What a beautiful, simple image: the cold cup of water. It reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not something high fallutin', it's not a bunch of abstract ideas, it doesn't demand a bunch of complex religious explanations: the Kingdom of God is as close and as down to earth as offering a cold cup of water in the name of Jesus. It's as simple as you and me saying the words: Jesus is Lord. No one can say those words except by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God shines out in the smallest acts of kindness and compassion. Those small actions: those are the packages in which Jesus goes out to people. The world is so thirsty right now. Let's rejoice in the Savior, Jesus Christ, and go out there with his lifegiving water.