

“Stop Preaching These Heavy Sermons”

Matthew 10:40-42

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Singer/songwriter Harry Chapin wrote a song entitled “Stop Singing These Sad Songs.” It was a tongue-in-cheek response to critics who said he always wrote songs about sad things. He did, of course. He wrote about unrequited love; deeply troubled people, including a sniper; family issues, like the workaholicism described in “Cat’s in the Cradle.” Harry didn’t dispute the claim, he just saw value in telling these stories. So, he mocked the critique by singing:

Stop singing these sad songs
Just tell me 'bout the good times
I have heard that cold hard truth so many times before
Stop singing these sad songs
Just tell me 'bout the good times, baby
'Cause I don't want to hear them old heart breaking sad songs anymore

I think of this song today because I wonder if I might need to preach a sermon entitled “Stop Preaching These Heavy Sermons.” You might feel like I have been preaching some heavy sermons the past few weeks — I certainly do — and in this time of isolation and anxiety, protest and complaint, we probably all need a break. We don’t have our normal outlets for emotion. We can’t go to a ballgame or movie. In such a time, we need something light, something warm and fuzzy, and there is hope in today’s Gospel reading about offering a cup of cold water, but I can’t make any promises because of the time in which we live and the kind of water Jesus calls us to share.

But let’s begin with the warm and fuzzy. Jesus says that whoever gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward. We think of the little things we can do

to help others, things people of all ages can do to make a difference, and in this strange and challenging time there have been many uplifting stories about simple things people have done to make a difference.

I have referenced before a number of things our own members have done during the isolation required by COVID-19 — the kind notes that have been written by everyone from Asher Helms to Jamie Petty, the hundreds of masks that have been made by Mary Hauser and Barbara Jacobs, the meals that have been delivered, the phone calls that have been made, the errands that have been run, simply not meeting in-person, wearing masks. We have shared a cup of cold water with each other in many different ways and thus followed the teachings of Jesus.

I came across a story this week about a number of simple acts of kindness that have been shared following the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor (*Monday Mornings*, Gardner Webb University, June 22, 2020). The author participated in a virtual 5K to end racism and then listed these events documented in various places.

The Tennessee National Guard was set up in front of the state capitol in full riot gear. But the protesters were peaceful and started calling for them to lay their riot shields down...and they did it.

The sheriff in Flint, Michigan asked protesters what they wanted from him, and they started chanting “walk with us.” So, he left his gear behind and joined the protest.

A group of protesters in Louisville formed a human chain to protect a police officer who got separated from his unit.

A six-year-old girl heard about George Floyd...made a sign that said “Be Kind” ...and held her own peaceful protest outside her house.

They are all little things, but little things make a difference. Small acts of kindness, like a simple greeting or smile, can go a long way. And sometimes a small thing makes a huge difference. Most of us have read about the British World War II veteran, Captain Tom Moore, who at the

age of 99 decided to walk 100 laps in his garden to raise money to support health care workers around the world as they respond to COVID-19. His goal was to raise \$1,250 before he turned 100. He has turned 100 now and he has raised \$39 million! He is going to be awarded Knighthood for his efforts and rightly so, but Jesus says that whenever we share a cup of cold water, we will not lose our reward.

One scholar has noted that this reference in Matthew 10 is very much like Jesus' reference in Matthew 25 to caring for the least of these in need — the hungry and naked, the stranger and those in prison. The word translated as “least of these in need” is a superlative of the word translated as “little ones.” The righteous who care for the “littlest ones” in Matthew 25 are told that they will inherit the kingdom prepared for them by God from the foundation off the world. So, from a spiritual perspective, what we are talking about here is no small thing. It lies at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

But sometimes the cup of cold water doesn't feel quite so warm and fuzzy because sometimes the little things we do to help others involve some kind of risk or tension. For example, a number of our members shared real cold water with protestors a couple of weekends ago, those who attended a rally on the Capitol Square organized by a group of African-American pastors, including Dr. Harshaw from the other half of First Baptist Raleigh and Paul Anderson, who has spoken at our church recently. The focus was on racism in all the ways it is manifested in our society, including the legal system. It was a peaceful gathering and a passionate one, a time for some to openly express their pain and others like us to listen.

Not everyone in our church is comfortable with protests, and some may question our doing anything related to them. If the concern is that we seem to be making a statement against law enforcement in general, I would say a couple of things. First, we have also provided hospitality for police officers monitoring the ReOpen NC protests, allowing them to use our restrooms. A cup of cold water is a cup of cold water. We are called to offer hospitality to everyone, and we do not, as a church, have an adversarial relationship with law enforcement.

But the second thing I would say is that there are issues to address in the realm of law enforcement, as in every other part of our culture, and standing alongside those who have suffered injustice feels like a simple gesture of kindness and support that Christians should extend.

Let me share a personal story. The vast majority of my personal interactions with law enforcement have been positive and have stirred deep appreciation. But I did have one experience which gave me a tiny glimpse of what people of color experience too often.

When I was 10, an officer in an unmarked car tailgated my father on a freeway in the mountains of North Carolina until he sped up to let the vehicle pass. At that point, the officer turned on his lights and pulled us over. When he heard my father's English accent, he said he was going to give him a ticket for speeding. Dad sped up to 75 in a 70 zone to allow the car by — I know this because I was a rules freak as a child and stared at the speedometer. But, the officer said, because Dad was a troublemaker — because he questioned the officer's tactics — he would escort him to the police station and arrest him for going over 90.

When they could not get the judge off a golf course (it was a weekend), the officer demanded payment of a large fine. Dad told them he had Traveler's Cheques in the trunk of his car, which he retrieved, while carrying my one-year-old sister in his arms. But as he did, the officer held a gun on him just a few feet from his back. It was a terrifying experience, and one that stirs anger now, but I had just this one negative experience as a child. I cannot imagine fearing this for myself or my wife, son or daughter every time one of us walks down the street.

It is not all law enforcement people, but the fears people of color have are not unfounded, and the inequities people of color experience are not all tied to the legal system. This is why our deacons have put up banners outside the church using scripture and a few added words to say that we care about this suffering and the people who have endured it. It is a statement about systemic issues of racism that affect all of us. To those who thirst for some kind of support, we are offering a small cup of cold water — just that, not all that we can and will do, but that for now.

I heard an interview last week with a singer/songwriter from California who writes songs about many things, including her own

family struggles, but she has also addressed racism. When the interviewer asked her why, she told this story. When she was 17, she walked through a part of her city where people were holding up ugly racist signs and shouting racist things. This was new to her and quite shocking, so much so that she broke down in tears. As she reflected on this experience, she realized that as a white person walking down that street, people might assume that she agreed with the racism that was being expressed. She looked like she fit right in. The only way anyone would know otherwise would be if she raised her voice. Sometimes we have to raise our voice to get water to people who are dying of thirst.

I realize this may seem like I am stretching the text. I am not. Who exactly are the “little ones” to whom Jesus refers here? This entire chapter deals with the sending out of disciples, the nature of their mission, and the reality that they meet not just resistance but outright rejection at times. In the verses we have read, Jesus talks about welcoming the prophets who proclaim God’s truth, welcoming his disciples who preach about God’s reign and heal the sick, and he says that those who participate in this kind of hospitality — welcoming not just people in need but messengers of truth — will receive the reward of the righteous. So, if some of the cold water we share feels more like a prophetic act than a simple gesture of kindness, it is very much in keeping with the teachings of Jesus, indeed this very teaching.

The author of the text Catherine Carter will sing now, Shirley Erena Murray, said this about “For Everyone Born” (cofchrist.org).

I selected the areas of injustice which directly affect women, children and the elderly — always the first casualties of discrimination, poverty or war. I leave it to the singer to imagine other forms of discrimination. And it became clear that no amount of writing about people’s rights will ever be effective if the supreme component of forgiveness, which creates understanding and compassion, is not there... I hope that as you sing this, you find yourself speaking out for anyone excluded from having a voice at the table of decision making on grounds of gender, age, orientation, or race. It seems we still need to do this!

Indeed, it does. And so, we are called to keep sharing a cup of cold water with everyone in need — a simple cup of kindness and love, and a courageous cup of encouragement and understanding — trusting that when we do, we will not lose our reward — the knowledge that we have pleased our Lord.