

Pentecost 2, 2011

“Small is Beautiful”

Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40–42

Lord, as you have opened your door to us, as you have welcomed us, help us to show hospitality, even as you have shown hospitality to us. Amen.

We hear that Jesus has big plans for us.

Earlier in this tenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says we’re going to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”

These are big plans for little people.

He goes on to say that we’ll disregard money and not care much about what we wear: “You received without payment, [so] give without payment,” Jesus reminds us, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for

your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff . . .”

And, if that’s not enough, Jesus goes on to say that some will face persecution: “Look, I’m sending you out like sheep into a pack of wolves . . . for they’ll hand you over to councils and beat you in their synagogues . . . you’ll be dragged before governors and kings because of me . . .”

Well, these are big plans, probably much bigger than we would even like to imagine.

But now, here at the end of this chapter of big plans, Jesus closes with one final, surprising thought: “. . . And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Jesus seems to imply that we can withstand the searing, demanding heat of discipleship with just a little dose of hospitality.

People sometimes snicker when I talk about the church's need to practice hospitality toward others, even though the Letter to the Hebrews plainly says, "Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

And Paul in Romans urges us to "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

Surely, we think, there are more important things for Christians to do than something so small as a drink of cold water.

Hospitality tends to evoke images of sweet kindness, lace tablecloths, tea parties, bland conversations, a cozy atmosphere around the fireplace.

Nothing very bold about these kinds of hospitality.

Some years ago, Father Henri Nouwen wrote extensively about the Christian virtue of hospitality claiming that “in our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered piety than a serious search for an authentic Christian spirituality . . .”

But he goes on to point out that “hospitality . . . can deepen and broaden our insight into our relationships with our fellow human beings . . . fearful strangers can become

guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them . . . the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of the new-found unity [between host and guest].”

For people like me who are not very good at the big stuff that Jesus is talking about in this chapter like casting out unclean spirits, curing the sick, raising the dead, being sent into a pack of wolves, and hauled before governors and kings, well, the chance to offer hospitality comes as good news.

For people like us who encounter great difficulty giving up our money belts and traveling light in this world, the opportunity to practice hospitality would seem like something

that we all can do.

Jesus seems to suggest that if you're not called upon to do the big stuff, don't sweat it, just offer a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.

You don't have to do *big things* in order to accomplish *great things*.

In the rule of God, small is beautiful.

And that's hard for us big Americans, and even bigger Chicagoans to imagine.

We love to have things big.

Obviously, we like big buildings, even big church buildings. Who notices a storefront or Bible chapel?

We like stories of congregations growing at astonishing

rates to become big congregations.

And we are told that if churches don't have something appealing, something *really big* that attracts "the youth," keeps "the children," and fulfills "the adults," then we are failing.

"It's hard not to like bigness in America," someone has written, "where the average entree at a restaurant these days could feed four people, and where the average pick-up truck can't fit into normal parking spaces anymore. . .

"Often," he concludes, "smaller churches are left feeling like failures unless they manage to change into a big church."

It's hard for us to believe that small is beautiful.

It's hard for us to believe that a big God could take on a small place on the cross right next to his "little ones."

So, I suppose it's hard for us to believe that we "little ones" are also beautiful amongst strangers in a vast universe.

No wonder, when Mother Teresa writes about "this terrible sense of loss [that she feels]—this untold darkness—this loneliness—the continual yearning for God—which gives me pain deep down in my heart," people are left bewildered.

That's not the way we imagine a person of big faith should feel.

We live in a place where we often seem so small,

where our lives seem to count for nothing.

And in such a world, maybe it is the small, freely offered acts of hospitality that can really mean something to us, that can begin to make our lives seem worthwhile again.

The Scriptures remind us that Jesus has reached out to us Gentiles and included us: “Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

“Once we were no people,” says First Peter, “but now we are God’s people,” not because we paid for it, not

because we worked for it, and not because we deserved it.

“You received without payment, [so] give without payment.”

“Welcome one another, therefore,” Paul writes in Romans, “Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

“. . . For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . [and] truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

We can all do those little but deeply gracious acts of hospitality that reveal the reign of Christ in our cold, iron-clad, computerized, dehumanized society.

Opening the door to a stranger breaks down a barrier of isolation, offering the possibility of friendship in a world of walls and loneliness.

A smile requires eye contact.

A handshake means unclenching fists.

A piece of bread can offer fellowship.

“You received without paying, give without being paid.”

In doing so, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the world as God created it to be—not this uncaring, walled-off,

inhospitable place where strangers are a threat and people in need are a nuisance—but a world where there is kindness, and grace, and care.

And you won't be billed for it!

One of the most famous legends of St. Francis of Assisi is the tale of Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio.

One day, it is said that Francis went to the town of Gubbio where a wolf was terrorizing and devouring the townspeople who had dared to go beyond the city gates.

When Francis learned of the problem, he said that he would go and speak to his brother, the wolf.

When the wolf saw Francis and his companions coming toward him, he charged out of the woods bristling and baring

his teeth. But Francis made the sign of the cross over the wolf and the wolf bowed at his feet.

Francis said: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone."

Francis explained to the wolf that he had been killing and frightening the people of Gubbio and this was against God's law. But he also knew that the reason why the wolf had been doing this was because there was no more food in the forest and the wolf was hungry.

Francis said he wanted to make peace between the wolf and the townspeople. So, he returned to Gubbio with the wolf at his side, where he preached a sermon in the town square on God's love and mercy.

The wolf agreed to stop terrorizing the people, and in return, the people agreed to feed the wolf.

For two years the wolf lived among the people of Gubbio in peace, as their companion and brother, receiving bread and water from their hands.

And, when the wolf died, the people of Gubbio wept, for the wolf was a reminder to them of the holiness of St. Francis and God's gentle presence with them.