

Cups of Care

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on Care Team Sunday

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Rev. Ken Heintzelman

John said to him, "teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." (Mark 9: 38-41)

The reference of giving cups of water in this passage is not for encouraging people to be kind and compassionate. The context of this passage makes the simple act of giving a cup of water an act of power, which is a part of a greater work of God to remake the world. Please note that one of Jesus' disciples complains to Jesus that some other unauthorized people are doing ministry and he thinks Jesus should stop them. Those other guys have not been deputized and they are not wearing the "Jesus Badges". Jesus responds, "They don't need no stinking Jesus Badges. The results of their work speak for itself. You can tell what kind of tree it is by the fruit that it bears. Whoever is not against us is for us and whoever gives you a cup of water instead of kicking you in the teeth because you carry on a compassionate and just ministry is on our side." I wanted to unpack this passage a little bit because we tend to focus on the act of giving a cup of water as an act of compassion which pleases God and thus helps us get reward points toward an afterlife. I think this passage links our acts of compassion with justice and it links our acts of kindness with the larger context of God's newest thrust in history.

ACTS OF COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

The offering of a cup of water to a thirsty and dying person is a literal act of compassion and justice for our nation as we struggle with the legal, political and economic conditions on both sides of the US-Mexican border. Regardless of the diverse political ideologies represented in our congregation I believe that every one of us faced with a thirsting and dying human being with blistering feet and blistering lips our ideologies will dry up. Human being to human being we would give the cup of water and we know it would be right because it is also an act of power to preserve a life, and as our non-negotiable Covenant says, "affirm every life".

The offering of a cup of water to a thirsty and dying person is also a metaphor and this is what I want to focus on and celebrate today.

The image of one person giving a cup of water to another person is a powerful image of care. It was such an image in the movie "Ben Hur" that has impressed itself on our Boomer Generation imaginations. Charlton Heston is a dirty sweaty beaten and broken slave fallen on his knees with exhaustion who receives a much needed cup of water from a white robed stranger who we know to be Jesus. Later in the movie Charlton Heston returns the act of kindness to the same stranger who falls on his knees broken, beaten,

stripped, and shamed. The stranger is Jesus who collapses exhausted on the road to his execution. This simple exchange of cups of water and kindness speaks to something deep inside of us and our hearts affirm the rightness of it. Remember the balance we are striving for this year? It includes the heart.

The giving of a cup of water is a metaphor of the ministry of our Care Team. When they reach out they are offering cups of mercy, kindness, and compassion.

- When they visit someone in the hospital they are offering a cup of faith to meet the need of fear.
- When they sit with a family who has a loved one in surgery they are offering a cup of reassurance to meet the need of doubt and concern.
- When they visit someone whose world has shrunk to the four walls of their home or their nursing home room they are offering a cup of friendship to meet the need of loneliness and the nagging concern that perhaps they have been forgotten and no one remembers them.
- When the Care Team prepares a meal or asks you to fix and drop off a noodle casserole for a grieving family they are trying to lift some of the everyday practical needs of life that feel so overwhelming when you have lost your partner, your parent, your spouse, your child, or your friend.
- When a member of the Care Team makes a simple phone call to check in they are reminding people that no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey they are not alone.

In addition to these “cups of water” the Care Team meets on a regular basis and they discuss the people in their care. Their discussions are aimed at how they can continue to be present for others and how can they do it better. The Care Team members also go to local conferences and workshops about visitation, terminal illness, and how to coordinate with other caregiving groups in the community. Perhaps the most courageous enterprise the Care Team has taken on is that they want to learn how to pray with people and they hope their ministry of prayer can lead to some unique opportunities for prayer and healing for the whole congregation. Imagine prayers as cups of water for our hearts and souls. All of us do this kind of mercy work and it is our Care Team that organizes itself and does such work with great intentionality.

ACTS OF KINDNESS AND GOD'S WORK IN HISTORY

It would be easy to stop here and appreciate the work and compassion of the Care Team but I do not think we would be true to the spirit of Shadow Rock if we stopped here without making a connection to justice. I am not talking specifically about social justice which is justice with political and economic implications. Justice discussions at this level

are important but I am asking you to imagine with me the higher level of discussion where justice and mercy are not opposites but complimentary. It is on this level where we are called as the people of God to live out our lives.

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Hear how justice and mercy are married and not divorced. Hear how we are called to live differently from cynics and scoffers of our society who would keep mercy and justice separate from each other. It is only our most shallow understanding and practices of mercy and justice that these virtues exclude each other. It is when we participate in God's newest thrust in history that we discover ways that they are part of a greater integrated work of the Spirit of Life and Love. Whether it is a literal sharing of a cup of water, holding the hand of someone in pain, or offering health care as a human right and not a privilege of employment, all of these acts of power contain the virtues of mercy and justice, and all of these acts participate in the greater work of God.

There is a preacher's story that comes out of an experience of a World War II soldier.

As bad as all of the ruin and destruction was, perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities. Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little boy with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside, the baker was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, drooling and watching the baker's every move. The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, and got out. "Son, would you like some of those?" The boy was startled. "Oh yeah . . . I would." The soldier stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag and walked back to where the lad was standing in the

foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply, “Here you are.” As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child quietly ask, “Hey Mister, are you God?”

In the story it is a bag of doughnuts. For our purposes today it is our acts of service, kindness, friendship, and compassion that mediate the divine to our most hurtful and needy moments.

Now, here is a stewardship moment and a stewardship reality. At one time not too long ago our congregation had on staff a Sr. Minister, an Associate Minister, a Parish Nurse in Doni Cunningham, and a Care and Cultivation Team. All of these people worked together to provide a pastoral and caring presence to our congregation. In contrast to that time we have a Care Team and me. I want to say that I am well aware of my shortcomings in this area of ministry, and I am not satisfied with the level of pastoral care I am providing to our congregation; it pains me. I am responding to the most urgent needs of people as they come up but not to the ongoing care needs of people as their lives unfold into weeks, months, and years. Our Care Team and several others of you are the regular pastoral presence for our most elderly and most ill members. I want to acknowledge this and I want to thank you, Care Team. Your cups of water not only help those you reach out to; they also help me and they project the vision and mission of Shadow Rock out into the world.