

**LITTLE ONES****Scripture Readings:** Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**Texts:** Psalm 13:5-6; Matthew 10:40-42

The gospel passage for this morning comes at the end of a long narrative where Jesus instructs the twelve for a mission trip to the surrounding region of northern Israel. This passage seems to stand in sharp contrast to the previous section of the instructions where Jesus tells the twelve that he comes not to bring peace but a sword; that trust in him will divide families, and that we must love him more than our parents or our children.

In today's reading, the word 'reward' is mentioned three times, the word 'welcome' is used two times, and an act of kind hospitality is described once. Compared to the reading last week, today's reading is positively giddy, right? You knew as soon as I said that I was about to dash cold water on it—so to speak.

As I said, Jesus has been instructing the twelve about their upcoming mission trip: he has told them to travel light and to stay with those who welcome them. In this final section he seems to be issuing a blessing on those who welcome the twelve into their homes. He describes the twelve as prophets, righteous people, and little ones who need this hospitality as they travel the region. Those descriptors, prophet, righteous person, and little ones, are interesting terms and I think for most of us they carry some baggage.

When I mention the word 'prophet,' I am willing to guess that many of us will picture a long haired, bearded man in robes who thunder to his listeners that dire things loom on the horizon as a prediction for the future. In the scriptures, we really don't know what the prophets did look like though we assume that they looked and dressed like most people in the centuries before Jesus was born. In every case, though, the prophet feels called by God to share God's word with God's people; in other words, they preached.

Sometimes their preaching involved words of hope to people displaced and lost. As in the Psalm this morning, the people may have complained that the world was unfair, but the prophet would proclaim God's steadfast love and promise of deliverance. The day would come when the people could sing to God for God's gracious care.

Very often, the preaching was corrective. God was concerned that the people did not live up to the standards of justice; the rich and powerful were exploiting the poor and powerless with unfair practices and schemes to bilk them out of land and wealth. All

the while the rich and powerful would proclaim that they were good people because they went to Temple regularly and offered generous sacrifices to God. The prophets would proclaim that God did not want sacrifices but justice for those being exploited. Unless just actions were taken, dire consequences would follow. Such consequences would be the natural result of what happens when a nation has massive wealth inequality and failing infrastructure that no longer supports the common good.

Now if you have a person telling the powerful to quit hoarding wealth for themselves and ignoring the plight of the poor and powerless, how do you think the powerful are going to react?

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on Mount: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (5:11-12)

Does Jesus really mean that when you welcome a prophet, you will receive a prophet’s reward? Oh, my.

How about the righteous person? I would guess that when we think of a righteous person we imagine someone who judges others when they commit social vices and get involved in immoral acts. We cannot help but insert the word ‘self’ before righteous and get utterly judgmental ourselves!

In the New Testament, the word ‘righteous’ could be better translated as ‘justice.’ This is not the justice of an ‘eye’ for an ‘eye,’ but the justice that God defines over and over again as care for the wellbeing of the whole community. Special attention is paid to providing for the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, and the alien in the land. Justice in the kin-dom of God revolves around compassion, peace, humility, and mercy.

What is the reward for righteousness? Well, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”(5:11) Does Jesus really mean that those who welcome a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous? Oh, my. Are you catching a pattern yet?

Well, how about the little ones? The gospel writer of Matthew loves this term, he uses it a lot. We might be tempted to think of little ones as children especially in light of chapter 18 where Jesus uses a child as an illustration for being part of God’s kin-dom. But as we continue reading that chapter, we realize that little one refers to any

who are excluded from welcome or community because we consider them unworthy (such exclusion could include children). Jesus reminds us that the church must be driven by a code of forgiveness even when we don't want to forgive. The lack of forgiveness makes a whole community impossible and is hardly representative of the inclusive nature of God's kin-dom.

The real kicker for 'little ones' comes in chapter 25 in the parable of The Sheep and the Goats. In that parable, the king says that I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. The righteous (the just) are puzzled, when did we see you thirsty? The king replies that you did this to the least (little ones), you did it to me.

We live in a different world than the world Jesus inhabited. Now we are the ones who welcome others: we can open our arms to truth tellers, those acting on behalf of the powerless, and those who are the little ones, judged unworthy by others. We can be those who provide a place of safety and comfort (once we get our building fixed), and we can give out those needed cups of cold water. In the most recent mission study, we recognized that the building and you, the congregation, can be central to this community in compassion and justice. As the Mission Study team discovered, Vigo County is one of the poorest in the state of Indiana, the field is ripe for reaching out to the little ones and to those who provide for them. Such ministry may not always be comfortable, popular, or easy, but it is necessary.

To welcome the proclamation of the truth, to do justice, and to show compassion for the little ones can be risky business. Such hospitality interferes with business as usual; it disrupts the plans of the powerful. Yet to be part of God's kin-dom, we must take the risk of such hospitality. In the name of God's love, we cannot do anything else.

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