

The Cup of Cold Water

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

October 1, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There it was, tucked into the corner of the pulpit, sitting on a paper towel to catch any spills—a glass of ice water, poured for me. After a few months of serving in my first parish, I noticed that a glass of cold water was always waiting for me as I approached the pulpit to preach. I hadn't put it there, nor had I seen the person who did. Some little “church mouse,” I suspected. And I was grateful. In the middle of a sermon when faced with a mouth as dry as cotton, or whenever I got a tickle in my throat, I'd turn to that glass of water for a good drink.

Turned out the little “church mouse” was Roger, who lived two doors down. He would get up early, throw on some old clothes, come into the church kitchen, get the glass of water and place it in the pulpit, then go home, eat breakfast, and get dressed for church. Roger did this every Sunday, with the exception of his vacation times.

You know, I could have made it through the worship hour without the glass of cold water. I didn't **need** it. But I sure did appreciate it. Mostly, I appreciated **Roger**, and the kindness and consideration he showed in that simple act.

“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.” When I read our Gospel lesson for this day, and came to these words from Jesus, I couldn't help but think of Roger.

Every congregation needs a Roger. Every congregation needs people whose presence speaks Christ to others, even in the most simple of ways. But Pastor Brian Jones goes one step further. He says that a healthy congregation needs **two** types of people. He says that the church just isn't the church unless it has two kinds of folks to keep it going: *“Those who rally around us when times get tough and those who inspire us as they walk ahead . . .”* (*The Christian Century*, April 2006)

I say all three of today's lessons remind us of what a faith community, created by the Holy Spirit, is intended to be. Just like Pastor Jones suggested, it is a place filled with those who rally around us when times get tough, and those who inspire us as they walk ahead.

The Old Testament lesson certainly suggests that. Think about Moses here. He's the leader of the Israelites who are meandering their way through the wilderness to get to the land promised them by the Lord God. Now, it's taking considerable time and effort to get there. Moses, being the leader, bears the brunt of criticism and complaining all along the way. The Israelites are not happy about their food and accommodations, and Moses is the first to hear about. Overworked and stressed out, he pleads to God to help him. He says, *“I'm not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”*

I haven't known a pastor of a congregation, or a president of a church council, or the head of some other organized group within the church that hasn't voiced something similar to that. I can't do it all. I can't do it by myself. I sure could use some help here.

And the Lord God does provide help for Moses. The Lord God tells Moses to gather 70 people whom he would consider as having leadership potential and bring them to the tent of meeting. Moses obeys, and then the Lord takes some of the spirit which formerly rested on Moses and pours it upon those 70 men, who now begin to prophesy for the Lord. Some of this massive burden Moses shouldered is lifted off him, as others take on part of his task. He didn't have to carry the people all alone. God made certain there were others to share the burden.

The part I particularly like is the mention of these two guys who stay in the camp—Eldad and Medad—but who for some reason get a portion of Moses' spirit as well, and they begin to prophesy. Moses' assistant, Joshua, is a little put out about this, and questions this. Now, face it, he's only upset because they didn't fill out the registration form, they neglected to sign up before the deadline, and they weren't on the short list of potential leaders. (Apparently they weren't even on the long list.) God's using them anyway, and Moses calls Joshua on his jealousy: *"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"*

Those of us in leadership positions in the church do not need to fear that the responsibility of ministry rests on us alone. Just look at all the people here. I have no doubt the Lord God will pour his Spirit upon each and every one of us as needed, and if we feel we're the sole person carrying the burden of a particular ministry here at Trinity, maybe we've just never looked far enough into the faces of the people around us. Maybe we guard our role a little too jealously, and like the feeling of being somewhat indispensable. Or maybe we've assumed that person two chairs away won't help or isn't capable of helping. Maybe that person two chairs away wants to do some kind of real and credible ministry and service, but we've never asked them. And maybe they don't yet have the skills or training or "knowledge" for a particular task—nothing worse than feeling as if you're being thrown to the wolves when tackling a new responsibility—but maybe that's because no one's bothered to teach them, and then support and affirm them in their task. There's a Roger there, but we've failed to recognize him and call him forth.

The Gospel lesson makes a related point. The disciples are annoyed that someone outside their group is casting out demons in Jesus' name. This unnamed person is like Eldad and Medad, okay? So Jesus responds to the disciples by saying, *"Do not stop him . . . whoever is not against us is for us."* In other words, don't prevent him from doing good works in my name, just because he's not exactly like you, because he doesn't fit the mold. Jesus admonishes them by saying if they're going to be a stumbling block for someone else who's doing what a disciple ought to do, it would be better if a great stone was tied around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. Members of a faith community must not become stumbling blocks. It is frighteningly easy to get in the way of ministry. Sometimes the institution of the church sets up so many rules and procedures, so many hoops to jump through, that people say, "It's not worth it to try to do this." Sometimes individuals in the church set up roadblocks to keep new people from entering into leadership where their enthusiasm would be infectious, or to keep new ideas from ever reaching the point where those new ideas can actually be tried. Sometimes our own sinfulness becomes the stumbling block. In our dealings with each other here, we can be uncooperative, mean-spirited, lazy, negative, or quick to blame others for our mistakes. In which case, faithful ministry cannot happen. Jesus tells his disciples quite graphically to get rid of the offending limb that sins and makes them the stumbling block.

Of course, Jesus rarely gives a prohibition without offering guidance on what the disciples **ought** to be doing. Jesus turns the conversation around to a positive action that will ultimately promote peace in the community: *“Have salt in yourselves,”* he says. Be salty. A strange image to be sure, except that salt on the tongue gets noticed. Its flavor is sharp and distinctive. Is Jesus suggesting that each one of us is called, with our various gifts, to a distinctive ministry in his name in this place? And that, if we don’t answer that call and use those gifts, and likewise don’t encourage and support others to use their gifts, then we are all like salt that’s lost its flavor?

What might those gifts be? What saltiness do we have? James, in our second lesson, plants a few specifics in our heads that were important for community in his opinion. “Is any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them” James even suggests that, should someone in the fellowship be wandering into sin, taking the wrong path, the other members of the community should strive to bring them back. Every person’s gift was to be used for the community.

So, take the whole of Jesus’ words this morning, add our other lessons, and it’s clear that each of us is responsible for this fellowship of faith we call Trinity Lutheran Church. Not one of us is exempt from the responsibility of doing ministry here, and the community as a whole suffers if just one of us abdicates that responsibility. In fact, we are responsible not only for the whole, corporate church in this place, but also responsible for each other.

Let me tell you one way that may look. An hour ago, a number of our members gathered together to talk about how they might minister to one family in our congregation—the Fickes family. Jim is battling Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS), and he and his wife Suzanne and their two kids have needs we can meet. So, a number of you met together today to discuss doing yard work at their house, helping Jim, providing evening meals. I am so grateful to you that you would offer to serve in this way.

And that goes right back to Pastor Jones’ thoughts about the church not being the church unless it had two types of people: Those who rally around us when times get tough, and those who inspire us as they walk ahead. Jesus our Lord, whom we strive to imitate, was both. So, let me ask you—who are you? Are you Roger, sustaining others with a cup of cold water and your quiet, unassuming way? Are you the one who will rally around a fellow member when times get tough? Are you the one who will inspire us all by forging on ahead? Which of these has God called you to be? **AMEN.**