

Several times this year we've had people who are in need stop at the church. They've come at choir time, at worship time, at other times; and they always have a story. And we do our best to help them; we open our hearts and purses and give what we can. We've helped with hotel rooms, food, and rent; and welcomed them into our midst.

And we do this, because this is what God wants us to do. God wants us to welcome the poor, the hungry, the hopeless, the stranger into our midst and do what we can to help them. It is there throughout the OT and the New, this call on our lives and our resources to do what we can for others. Here it is again in our scripture for today: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones in the name of a disciple will not lose their reward." There's not really any question about what we're being called to here: it's the concept of sheltering the widows and orphans and strangers—those who are weaker than we are, or poorer than we are, or alone in an alien land—all of these need our friendship, our compassion, our support.

But sometimes it seems like no matter what you do, it doesn't make any difference. No matter how much you give to someone, it doesn't really help them, or they don't really appreciate it. They come back for more, beginning an seemingly endless cycle of them asking for help and us giving them money; the next thing you know there's another crisis and they're back again and pretty soon we've given them hundreds of dollars and they still have needs, they still have problems. And after a while we start to think, "does this person really need my help, or are they just looking for some sucker to give them a handout?" We might hear that they have at various times visited other churches in our neighborhood--- and we might start to think that they're conning us, they are people just looking for someone to take advantage of. It doesn't make it any easier when we hear our leaders calling poor people lazy and undeserving. Because while that may be true, well, that really isn't the point, is it? I mean, Jesus didn't say to his disciples and the crowds of people around him, whoever gives a drink of water to someone *who they know is not a con man* will not lose their reward—Jesus just tells us to do it. Jesus doesn't say, give them a drink *if we know they deserve it or let them get their own water, they're only thirsty because they're lazy*. Jesus just tells us to do it. To welcome the stranger. To feed the hungry. To give the thirsty a drink of water. Whoever does these things will receive their reward, no matter what the outcome of their giving.

There are a couple of problems we have with this teaching, I think. First of all, most of us have limited resources. We can't—or think we can't—throw away what precious little we have on someone or something that isn't worthy. Especially in our culture here in America, we believe that we should get something for what we pay for—and that getting something for nothing doesn't happen for us, why should it happen for someone else? We don't have even enough to take care of ourselves, how can we (or why should we) take care of someone else?

Then there's the related assumption that people are poor because they choose to be. "They" are either lazy, or dishonest, and willing to take advantage of honest hard working folk like "us". If "they" would just get a job, then "they" could take care of themselves and leave "us" alone. "They" can make more money panhandling or on welfare than if they worked, so "they" just let "us" support them. The bad part of this is that yes, there are people who will take advantage of us, there are people who don't want to work for whatever reason and are happy living from handout to handout, there are people who for whatever reason live outside of society's rules and seem to expect the rest of us to pay for them.

Things were not so different in the time of Jesus. There have always been, and always will be, those people who just can't seem to take care of themselves, for whatever reason. There have always been people willing to make their gains through the losses of someone else. It was into this atmosphere that Jesus sent out his disciples with nothing—knowing that those who were open to the way of Jesus Christ would be the ones who would accept these itinerant preachers at face value.

And so it has become a hallmark of being an authentic disciple of Christ that we open ourselves to all of those who are in need, without trying to make judgments about whether or not we think they are deserving. Because the truth is, we can't really see into anyone else's heart, all we can know is what is in our own. And if we honestly and with faith open ourselves to those that we meet, even the ones asking something of us, then we will receive the reward of the righteous. Because you never know just what difference you might make in a person's life, just by treating them with dignity and giving their story the benefit of the doubt. When we open ourselves to the ones that seem to be the least deserving, when we offer them a touch of human kindness such as a cold drink of water on a hot day, we are fulfilling a part of the call that Jesus has on our lives.

Of course the other side of this is that most of us do have only a limited amount of resources to get ourselves through life, let alone give to someone else. But I think individual giving is important, and it is important to be open to spontaneously giving your help to someone who's in need—and not just monetary help, but physical help like opening your home to someone down on their luck, as well as emotional and spiritual help. But it's also vital that we work together to be proactive in the fight against poverty and homelessness. It's important that we partner with other agencies and churches so that our strength is multiplied against the forces of evil in our society that lead people away from living in community with each other, that keep people from living fully authentic human lives without having to worry about where their next meal is coming from or where they're going to sleep at night. We need to fight against things like drug and alcohol abuse that tears apart families and ruins lives. We need to fight against the inhumanity of large corporations that are so consumed with the financial bottom line that they forget about the human cost of large layoffs and low wages. We need to work within our communities to improve mental health services—did you know that a large percentage of homeless people suffer from some type of mental illness—many of them war veterans who suffer from PTSD that goes untreated because there aren't enough resources to help them all? We need to remember that we are the community, we are the government, we are the ones responsible for offering the least of these a drink of water to soothe their weary souls. Every person, Christian and non Christian, should be concerned about these issues. But we as Christians should be especially concerned, because we are called by Christ to be not only concerned but to act.

Friends, I encourage you to continue in your generous ways, and I also encourage us to find new ways to work together with other groups to fight some of the problems that plague the "least of these" in our community. To that end on Tuesday, July 11—a week from Tuesday—we're having a mission team and deacon meeting to talk about, and hopefully come up with some ideas and a maybe a strategy that will help us do more than just hand out money to people, but will also to walk beside them in some way, if possible. Not only will we feel the satisfaction of making the world a better place, but we will also receive the reward of the righteous. Amen.