

I’ve felt a bit overwhelmed this week, surges in Covid infections, and ongoing racial tensions and protests. We are easily overwhelmed by grief and despair; overwhelmed by wondering what to do. We’d all like to do something to make the world better! What do we do? Should we join a march to stand with our black brothers and sisters? Could we pray more? Always. We could also contact anyone who is hurting from this virus or any other sickness. We could send notes or make more phone calls, and please feel free to call me if you’d just like to chat! And I wonder if I should be contacting some of my friends who are black, friends I made mostly in my grad school days. We are in a bit of a bubble here. You could call it a lily-white community. So we are hard-pressed to have conversations with people of diverse races.

The gospel reading for this morning may give us a clue about something we could do. When we read the Bible, we often ask ourselves, “What words jump out at me?” And in the gospel reading that Lynn just read, the words that popped out at me this week as I studied them were very simple words: “Whoever gives to one of these little ones, even a cup of cold water, because he’s a disciple, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:40-42) Perhaps Jesus is saying that even the smallest thing can make a huge difference.

It reminds us of other stories of Jesus, also, one of the most famous being his story about the sheep and the goats, about who would be welcomed by God in the heavenly places. Jesus said it would be those who would feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick or in prison. Those would be the sheep at the right hand of God. It is very similar to this story. Yes, a “reward” even if you offer a cup of water. “Even if you visit or give clothing to the least of these my brothers and my sisters”—even if you do it for someone who is on the margins. It would be as if you did it unto me myself, said Jesus.

Sometimes we are looking for a God who will fix everything, especially in these times; we definitely want a fix, a cure, or at least a vaccine. But Jesus does not talk about fixing everything. Yes, there were cures; yes, there were some miracles that he did, but not in every situation. Jesus did not cure everybody. Jesus shows us the way of the cross. We don’t like it, but he shows us the way of suffering, the way of giving even sacrificially, the way of a Savior who walks with those who are hurting, who walks alongside them as his way of healing. Jesus knows that we cannot eradicate poverty or fix it totally. Therefore, we have his famous saying that “the poor will always be with us.” There will always be opportunities to help someone in need. He didn’t say that he would eradicate all of that, and therefore we cannot eradicate racism and oppression either. It’ll never be eliminated from this earth. It will always be with us.

So, we're back to what can we do? Perhaps giving a cup of water, perhaps feeding others through food pantries, or clothing others, through the work of our thrift shop. Perhaps visiting anyone who's sick or in prison, or who feels enslaved, who feels imprisoned. Will we visit them? Will we talk with them?

We remember also that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” There was this kind of priority for those who are in great need. They will receive some kind of blessing. Jesus is advocating small acts of kindness. We would like to make a huge difference, but we may be able to make only a small difference. The gospel reading started out with a simple “welcome:” “He who welcomes you welcomes me.” (If you my followers are welcomed by someone, they're really welcoming me.) So we can say that Jesus was clear that we would be like him; we would share His spirit with other people. He goes further: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.” So, if we are received and welcomed by someone in peace, then that one is also receiving Christ, and is also receiving GOD!

I like to call this the transitive law, as in mathematics: If A equals B and B equals C, then A equals C, so we can extrapolate and see the “spirit” of that. If A is in communion with B, and B is in communion with C, then A is in communion with C. If we are in communion with Jesus, and someone is in communion with us, that person is also in communion with Jesus. And since Jesus is in communion with God, that person is also in communion with God. It's a beautiful law—the transitive law of mathematics, and I'd call it Jesus's law of spiritual communion!

Back to the cup of water. If we are giving a cup of water and someone is receiving a cup of water, Jesus is saying, “Hey, you're in communion with me, the Christ spirit of giving and receiving. For us, it might be the coffee clatch down the street: one offers a cup of coffee and one receives a cup of coffee. It might be a smile that we offer, as simple as a smile, because Jesus is talking about small things: a handshake (though we don't want to do that nowadays!) or we perhaps the elbow-bump greeting! Some small kindness can be communion with Jesus.

Addressing our interracial problems, what about the simple kindness of starting a conversation with someone different from ourselves? Paul said, “To the Jews I became a Jew, to the Gentiles I became a Gentile, to the weak I became weak, I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” Now it's impossible to be “all things to all people,” but as followers of Jesus and of Paul, we could try it and do fairly well (by that transitive law ... if Paul can do it, we can too!) We could start conversations, even with random people!

Now many may be thinking: What about evil and hostility? It's all well and good to talk about being neighborly about acts of kindness, but what about real hostility, evil, being attacked? Being attacked for our viewpoints; being attacked for our color of skin, being attacked for whoever we are; being attacked for our

family constellation, who we choose to love. What if we’re being attacked? Well, let’s go back to the cup of water. Small acts of kindness, even to people who might be enemies. Even if the conversation goes sour, we’ve at least tried to start the conversation. I feel this is part of our calling. We need to offer that cup of coffee or offer that hello, or offer that conversation especially with people who seem very different than ourselves.

One thing you can find online that somehow got into my emails: I found it fascinating...an NFL linebacker by the name of Emanuel Acho a black player. He started something on Youtube called “Uncomfortable Conversations.” He was a linebacker in the NFL for many years... a big, rugged guy. He found out that he had the gift of conversation also, so he started his “Uncomfortable Conversations.” He’s most articulate about how many black people feel; even with his size, he is looking over his shoulder often, or thinking about every move he makes in public, especially not to appear threatening. We cannot fully put ourselves in the skin or shoes of black people, but we can try to understand them better by listening attentively to their voices.

We can be thankful that God made us all different. We may be all lily-white around here, but surely we have differences: perhaps socioeconomic differences or differences in whom we call family: We’re single, we’re widowed, we’re partnered, we’re not partnered, have same sex partner, or perhaps a traditional nuclear family. We’re all different. God made us distinctive, so we can celebrate that. “Loving our neighbor” will always mean loving people who are different, because not one of us is alike!

Jesus, in an evangelical teaching, recommends and urges disciples to relate to those who are different or strangers. He says, “Go out into the towns and stop at houses (it sounded like random houses), and say “peace be with you!” It is hard for us to do that door to door thing nowadays, but maybe in walks around town, we could say peace be with you... like on the rail trail, or with neighbors, and especially with people who are different from ourselves, even potential enemies. We can simply say “peace” and if our peace is not welcome, as Jesus says, “shake the dust off” and keep moving! This church started a welcome wagon many years ago; regrettably it fell by the wayside. It went well for a little while, maybe a year or two. As many things do, it had its time in the sun and then fizzled out ... perhaps due to lack of workers or new volunteers. It would take a whole committee to be a really good welcome wagon. As Jesus said, the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. So volunteer organizations need more people and more help all the time. It would be good to start a welcome wagon again in this time of “distancing” and social isolation. Whether a greeting of welcome is received or not does not matter. Just the invitation is what counts, just offering a loaf of bread, or perhaps Zoom invites, or perhaps passing out masks! We have a few extra here that say “Peace.” I

will use it walking around town. Offering a greeting of peace, even through a mask, may be a “cup of cold water” to one who is avoiding everyone and not talking to anyone.

I would like to share briefly, because we read a lament Psalm this morning (Psalm 13!), ideas from Richard Rohr, spiritual leader and scholar with the Catholic Church. He talks about the oneness we have through a suffering God. We follow the way of the cross, a Savior who is willing to suffer with the “universal suffering” of the world. When we suffer in solidarity with others, it helps keep us from self pity or self preoccupation. We know that we are all in this together, and that our healing is bound up with everyone else’s healing. Rohr insists that all people are “carrying some secret hurt, even when they don’t know it.” That was so true of my father; he never knew that he was adopted, and when he was given up at nine months due to the death of his mother, it must have been a deep and abiding hurt that he could never express, and of which he was only subconsciously aware. This realization that all people carry some hidden hurt “softens the space around our defended hearts.” We can have softer hearts when we realize that all people are carrying hurts. “It makes it hard to be cruel to anyone;” and it somehow “unites us with others in a way that easy comfort and entertainment cannot.” Suffering and compassionate love can be amazing vehicles for uniting and reconciling.

So, back to the cup of water! Let’s remember the hierarchy of needs, listed by Abraham Maslow. We need to give people water, we need to give people food, of course we do! But we also need to give a cup of water for the heart, to alleviate some suffering, bring a little laughter, and some love that can lighten the heart. Can we listen, can we love, can we extend even forgiveness and mercy? Love is indeed “the most durable force” (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.), a lasting cup of water. With the pandemic and racial tension, these are indeed days of “universal suffering.” So let’s do our best to extend a cup of water, even a cup of patience, kindness, or mercy, knowing that everyone is has some inner suffering or secret hurt. Amen.