The Church of the Transfiguration
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (Pride Sunday)
Matthew 10:40-42

A Cup of Cold Water

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Some of you might be familiar with Ascension Church in the West Village. Ascension is the Episcopal parish that is located on Fifth Avenue between 10th and 11th Street.

Each year, the parishioners and clergy of Ascension do something simple but special for Pride Sunday. You see, the route of the Pride March goes right in front of their church. And as the Pride March goes by, the people of Ascension carry trays of small paper cups filled with cold water, which they offer to the marchers. It's quite a sight!

Now this might not seem like a big deal. But if you've ever walked in the Pride March (like I have), you know how wonderful it is to be offered a cup of water after waiting in formation for hours, and then marching some two dozen blocks on the hot summer asphalt – often while carrying banners and signs.

Offering a cup of water is Ascension's way of saying "we love you," "you matter to us," and "you are welcome here."

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If you haven't guessed already, the theme of today's reading from St. Matthew's gospel is welcome. Jesus says the word "welcome" six times in the short passage, and he makes it clear that act of welcoming someone is a holy act. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me," Jesus says to his disciples. That is, anyone who welcomes a disciple also welcomes Jesus himself.

But that's not all. Jesus also tells his disciples that "whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." In other words, anyone who welcomes Jesus also ends up welcoming God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Jesus then talks about three categories of disciples who must be welcomed: prophets; righteous persons; and the little ones.

First, there is the prophet – a person who courageously speaks the Word of God, no matter how difficult the message might be to hear. In today's Hebrew Bible reading, the prophet Jeremiah describes the prophets that preceded him. They had prophesied war, famine, and pestilence, and their people rejected them.

Now few of us are true prophets. (And that's probably a good thing!) But each of us <u>can</u> welcome a prophet when we encounter one. As Jesus says, "[W]hoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward."

Second, there is the righteous person – a person who lives faithfully in accordance with the Word of God. That's not an easy thing to do. As St. Paul writes in today's epistle reading, it's hard to be righteous when we are often enslaved by the "greater and greater iniquity" of our broader society. And let's face it, righteous people can often come across as being rather annoying.

Few of us are truly righteous. (And again, that's probably a good thing.) But each of us can welcome a righteous person when we encounter one. As Jesus says, "[W]hoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous."

Third, there are the "little ones" – those people who live on the margins and who are ignored by society at large. Now you might think of children when you hear the phrase "little ones." And you would be right. However, the Greek word used here – *mikros* – is not just used to describe people who are young or small in stature. The word is also used to describe those people who are perceived to be of inferior status or of little value.

What Jesus is saying here is that we should welcome those who are perceived to be "lesser than" by the rest of society. This is because we are all of equal value and worth in God's eyes. As Jesus says, "[W]hoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Prophets. Righteous persons. Little ones. These are the three kinds of disciples who Jesus teaches us to welcome in today's gospel passage.

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This year marks a special anniversary in the history of The Episcopal Church. Fifty years ago, our denomination took a small but extremely important step in the march towards equality for LGBTIQ+ people.

During the 1976 General Convention that was held in Minneapolis, the Episcopal Church passed a historic statement that recognized – for the very first time – that "homosexual persons" were "children of God." This is what the resolution said:

> Resolved, That it is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.

This resolution may not sound like a big deal. In fact, I was telling Michael about this last night, and he said "Who in the world uses the word 'homosexual' anymore?" But think about how much hatred there was towards "homosexual persons" five decades ago. Even today, there are still Christian denominations who consider LGBTIQ+ people be "unnatural" or "intrinsically disordered."

As such, the 1976 statement by The Episcopal Church was an incredible cup of cold water given to those who had thirsted all of their lives for a loving welcome from the Church.

In subsequent years, the Episcopal Church has recognized the full humanity of not only lesbians and gay men, but also bisexual, nonbinary, two-spirit, and transgender people – as well as anyone who falls under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella.

We mean it when we say: "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You!"

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So, on this Pride Sunday, I ask you this. Who are the prophets, the righteous persons, and the little ones in your life? Who are the ones who say difficult things, who act in annoying ways, or who are perceived to be of little value to society?

And what can you do to welcome these people? How might you give them a cup of cold water? Might that cup of water take the form of a smile, a loving word, or an act of kindness?

Or might that cup of water take the form of marching this afternoon with our parish contingent – along with Houghton Hall and the Episcopal Actors' Guild? If that interests you, please stick around after church for a pizza party, and we'll announce when and where we'll be meeting to join the Pride March.

The point of today's gospel passage is this. We can't all be prophets, righteous persons, or little ones. And that's perfectly fine. But what each of us <u>can</u> do, however, is to welcome those persons in our own way. It can be as simple as giving someone a cup of cold water. And by doing so, we end up welcoming Jesus himself – and even God.

Jesus said, "[W]hoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Happy Pride!