

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
5th Sunday after Pentecost, year A, July 2, 2023
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When I was a teacher in an Alternative to Incarceration program, I was surprised that my students took such pride in the silly stickers I put on their papers. Over the years, I noticed more than one young man carefully peeling off the sticker and saving it in a notebook. And at the end of the week, I rewarded the student with the most check marks for good citizenship with a dollar for the vending machine. Stickers and a vending machine snack were small rewards, but they were enough to let my students know that I saw the efforts they were making.

In today's gospel, Jesus promises rewards to those who welcome a prophet or a righteous person, and even for providing a cup of cold water for one of the 'little ones.' In Jesus' day, the little ones were those who were dependent on others, and those who had no status. Much like the treatment of such persons today, in the first century these people were often seen as 'less than' when compared to people of power and influence. Yet Jesus held them up as children of God and worthy of compassion, attention, and high regard.

The rewards that Jesus promises for the ministry of welcome and care are the blessings that come from participating in the reign of God. This is an intrinsic reward: the privilege of being a part of God's plan for humankind. Welcome and kindness are an integral part of God's plan. And from these flows other blessings: comfort, wisdom, grace, and mercy.

The Gospel of Matthew often focuses on the practices of a healthy faith community. In the 25th chapter, he spells it out even more clearly: For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous* will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And Jesus responds, 'whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

It might seem overwhelming, to be responsible for those who cannot help themselves, because of poverty, lack of knowledge or resources, or connections, because of illness, disabilities, trauma, or any number of systemic or personal problems they may be facing. But the Talmud states, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

We do not have to do it all, but we do have to do something. Small acts of service and devotion might go unnoticed by many around us. But God notices. This is the life of faith- thousands of small acts of mercy and compassion carried out each and every day by the faithful, that bring near the reign of God. Sometimes, it is the smallest acts of kindness that can have the largest impact on another person's life and restore them to hope and wholeness.

Rick Ruzzamenti heard from a friend that he had donated a kidney to a friend in need. He was so inspired that he called the local hospital and asked if anyone needed one of his kidneys. This set off a chain of 60 operations for 30 people who would have died without one. Other donors became part of this chain because they could not donate to a loved one because of incompatible blood types or antibodies. Their loved ones, in turn, were offered compatible kidneys as part of the exchange. Because one man was inspired to offer his kidney. Chains have become more common in kidney donations and made possible by innovations in computer matching, surgical technique and organ shipping, as well as the determination of a Long Island man named Garet Hil, who was inspired by his own daughter's illness to supercharge the notion of "paying it forward."

I am sure you have your own stories of 'random acts of kindness' that you have heard about or been the recipient of. I'd love to hear them. While donating a kidney is not such a small thing, other gestures towards others whom we do not know can make a difference in the world. On the table in the entry of the church is a handout of 100 Acts of Kindness that we can try on.

Jesus sent out his disciples into the world. To encounter people in various towns, to proclaim to them that the kingdom of God has come near. When we welcome those who have been sent into our orbits, when we extend welcome and kindness to others, God kingdom is near indeed!

Let us pray.

We praise you, O God, with gladness and humility for all the joys of life, for health and strength, for the love of friends, for work to do and play to recreate us. We thank you for the adventure of life. Above all, we thank you for your gift of Jesus Christ our Lord, for the blessings that have come to us through his body the church. Help us to show our thankfulness, not only with our lips, but in our lives, always endeavoring to do what pleases you. Amen.