

## **Matt 10:40-42**

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever 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."

Today's text comes at the end of a long chapter in which Jesus has been preparing his disciples to go out on their own. He has told them what to pack, what kind of reactions to anticipate, what kind of work to do.

Today he is giving them their letter of reference. He's telling them that they are going out into the world representing not themselves, but that they are representing Jesus...and in representing Jesus they are representing God.

No small thing to be sent out with these particular credentials. Jesus is telling them...as you travel, as you live your lives, you are wearing my uniform, carrying my banner. From now on, you are bigger than yourself. You are representing Jesus, you are on a mission from God.

Clergy have some understanding of this kind of representative ministry. Even when we want to forget it, people remind us that we represent more than just ourselves in ways both positive and completely dysfunctional.

When I was a college chaplain, I went to supper one night in the college cafeteria. I ended up at a table with two students. One knew who I was, the other was clueless to my true identity. The clueless student began telling a very interesting autobiographical story, a story of beer, love and general wildness. I could see the blood pressure rising in the student who knew I was chaplain. I could see her searching for some way to clue in the story teller. Finally, as the story reached a particularly interesting point, the anxious young woman just blurted out, "You know Brenda is the chaplain of the college, right?" And abruptly, the story ended. We continued our meal in silence. I watched the story teller replay the story in her own head, flinching occasionally as she remembered particular details she had shared.

And I sat and contemplated the fact that I thought I was just Brenda having supper, but somehow, I was Brenda, representing Jesus, on a mission from God. But it didn't feel quite right. I couldn't figure out why this meant I couldn't get to hear the whole story. Did me representing Jesus mean that we all had to pretend to be someone we weren't?

This isn't just a condition of ordination. We sometimes forget that all Christians carry this responsibility and this burden. When we least consider it, others are looking at us and evaluating the institution and the God we represent.

A good friend of mine worked in the restaurant industry while going through high school. She said that Sunday afternoon and Wednesday night were the worst times to serve people. Large groups of rude, bossy, cheap people would come in talking loudly about church; they would treat her like the lowest of slaves, make a big mess, and then leave only the smallest of tips. She came to despise

church groups. She came to disrespect Christians. And she had no reason at all to have any interest in Jesus.

After a year or more of this, however, a small group of people began coming where she worked. They learned her name. Every week they asked her how her life was going, and they paid careful attention when she answered. They asked follow up questions the following week. They treated her not just like a person, but as a person who was loved and of sacred worth. And after a time, she tested them by telling them her stories of beer and love and wildness...and they still loved her. And for the first time, in the love of a group of disciples, she met Jesus.

A quarter of a century later, when she sends me her Christmas letter, it always mentions the fact that she is a representative of Jesus, and that her life has meaning because it is a mission from God.

I suspect when Jesus shared this representative commission with the disciples, he got his usual blank stare and several people saying, "What?" I can see Jesus, lovingly exasperated, saying, "Look, people, this isn't rocket science. If you see a thirsty child, give them a drink of water. Be my listening ears, be my caring hands, be my healing touch in a hurting world."

It was when I stopped working as clergy for a while that I finally got a handle on representative ministry. My first job when I moved to North Carolina was inspecting houses for homeowners insurance. I would drive around, take pictures of houses, measure them with a rolling wheel measuring thingamajoo, and answer a few questions about the condition of their roof and the presence of dangerous things like pools and trampolines.

But even in plain clothes, with no evidence of clergyness or even of Christianity, I would find homeowners following me around the house, telling me about their divorce, about their sister with cancer, about their missing dog. People would walk me to my car expressing the pains and longings of their hearts.

My second job was as a Computer Pal, going to different day care centers each day and teaching computer skills to 3-5 year old children. I learned an important lesson about three year olds. People who are three have three basic questions.

"Do you see me?"

"Do you love me?"

"Can I have another cookie?"

I saw my four year old nephew yesterday. He varied it a little. "Do you see me? Do you love me? Can I have a Hulk mask and green punching gloves?"

When I came finally to work as a hospice chaplain, I realized that regardless of the age, the questions are much the same. *Do you see me? Do you love me? Do you know the longings of my heart?*

From the smallest trailer to the largest house in Biltmore Forrest, the questions are the same.

From the healthiest person to the person closest to death, the questions are the same.

People join churches, not so much because of the preaching or the worship, or even the basic theology of the congregation. They join because someone turned around and learned their name, remembered it the following Sunday, and gave them an opportunity to share part of their story.

And it doesn't stop once we've joined. From the newest person in the pew to the man or woman who has been in this church longer than Jesus, has chaired every committee and experienced every historical moment in the life of the church, we each continue to ask:

Do you see me? Do you love me? Do you know the longings of my heart?

We, friends, are representatives of Jesus, on a mission from God. When we are aware of it, when it is the last thing on our mind, people here there and everywhere are encountering us and looking for more than just a little personal contact. They are trying to figure out if they have value. They are trying to figure out if God loves them. They are trying to figure out if the universe really cares that they are here.

They are searching our faces, measuring our conversations and searching desperately for even a glimpse of God and Jesus...for even a trace of love and acceptance.

Jesus Christ, do you see me? Do you love me? Do you know the longings of my heart?

If you offer even one of these thirsty little ones a cup of cold water, your reward will never be lost.

Amen.