

Text: Matthew 10: 40-42

In preparation for Canada’s 150th anniversary, coming up in 2017, Canadian public was invited to name Canadians who had most inspired them. At the top of the list was Pierre Trudeau, followed by Terry Fox, Tommy Douglas, Lester B Pearson, astronaut Chris Hadfield, David Suzuki, Jack Layton, John A MacDonald, Wayne Gretzky and Romeo Dallaire.

Given the service last week when you heard the story of a pretty amazing Canadian Jean Vanier, I was interested to see that his name was not one of the top 10. Maybe because his work is not what you would call glamorous or high profile. His work is with what we would call “the least of these”, people who are like children, vulnerable, dependent, who can’t always walk very well, or talk very well.

When we look at the work of someone like Jean Vanier we say: yes, indeed, he is living out the gospel; he is offering a cup of cold water, hospitality, friendship, welcome to some of “the least.”

And maybe our 2nd thought is: : and so we should do, we should welcome people like Jean Vanier welcomes people; we should offer cups of cold water, the most basic kind of hospitality, to the least.

Of course we should, but that’s not what this passage is about.

These words come at the end of a section where Jesus is sending the disciples out on a mission: without suitcases and money, no extra clothes, so that they would be dependent upon the hospitality of others. It is as travellers, as guests, that disciples will bring the good news. It is as strangers who NEED help that they will do their mission work. As well, Jesus is preparing them for conflict and for rejection: “I send you out as sheep among wolves.” Some people will receive them and feed them and listen; others will not. He is teaching them about what they can expect.

In that culture, people were not welcomed as individuals; they were welcomed solely because of who they represented, or who sent them, or who they were tied with. Jesus’ disciples came “in the name of Jesus” and they were received or rejected on that basis. Jesus is saying: “if people take you into their homes and feed you and give you a place to sleep, they are receiving me. If they don’t; they are rejecting me.” Even the giving of a cup of water can be the sign of someone’s acceptance of Jesus. Every small thing.

When Jesus mentions “the little ones” (whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones. . .) he is referring to the disciples: all of them. There were no “big” disciples, it sounds like (or very few).

Jesus, in his ministry, attracted the “unimportant, the unattractive, the downtrodden, the indifferent, the odd, and the wearisome.” We know the stories: the tax collectors and sinners. We could include lepers in that group too, and women who bled, and children, and someone like blind Bartimaeus who was told to be quiet and leave Jesus alone. These were the little ones who were welcomed by Jesus and became his disciples. He bonded to them. He welcomed them. They became his disciples.

As Paul says in 1 Cor: “few of you were wise by human standards; few were powerful; few were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised . . . ” And now these little ones are being sent out. And what will people see in them? Will they see Jesus? It is a crucial question, because if Jesus loves these little ones, then how can a person say they love Jesus and not love them too? Jesus’ attention and care divided people: they either appreciated him or came to hate him by whom he associated with.

So this passage raises a few questions for us.

Maybe we figure that this passage asks us to be compassionate, to give, to be generous, to notice those who are thirsty, and give some water. That makes us the givers, and others the receivers. And there is a challenge in that, to be a giver. And there is a challenge to pay attention to the little ones, the “unimportant, the unattractive, the downtrodden, the indifferent, the odd, and the wearisome”. But there is another more hidden challenge here.

What if WE are the little ones.

What if that is our identity, as followers of Jesus.

To be a disciple of Jesus means asks me to see my own littleness, and in doing so I become comfortable anywhere, with anyone. As I see and accept my own littleness, I become free. [There is a whole spiritual practise based on this sense of littleness: the smaller we are the easier it is for us to be lifted up, like a child; the gift of littleness is that we become light, not weighed down by anxiety, guilt, dread and heaviness; we expect everything from God; We let go of self-centeredness and rely only on God. [See Therese of Lisieux re “The Little Way”]

In Presbytery, we have heard the word “missional” used a fair bit over the last few years. Many have come to the conclusion that the NA church has lost its sense of mission. There is a teacher Alan Roxburgh who suggests that the new way we need to learn to be missional is based on a passage like this: to be disciples means to go out as strangers into our community, and to receive hospitality: “what God is doing in the world has a lot more to do with being the stranger and receiving hospitality than being in control of the resources and the answers . . . only as strangers can we begin to see God’s spirit at work” (Roxburgh, 123-4). And if people are open to us, and will sit at table with us, and talk with us, and relate to us, that is how we will discover and live the gospel. That may sound very strange: to be a disciples = to become vulnerable, and in our

vulnerability the world will come to know Jesus.

There is a very strange story, that some of you will not want to hear, or even become angry, but it's about a congregation in Toronto. They kept saying that everyone was welcome, and some people in the neighbourhood began to believe them, and to see if it were true, particularly some people who called themselves trans-gender. They began to come. The minister says "they taught us how to be church." They taught us what the gospel really is, and who Jesus really is: The Holy Spirit did a strange thing . . ."

As soon as I read that first line, I knew what she was talking about, and I knew there was something I had to pay attention to here; that's what the HS always seems to do: reverse things on us. When we become the little ones who need to learn, doors start to open.

I think Jean Vanier would say the same thing. His house mates, in their vulnerability, in their unconditional hospitality of him, taught him who Jesus was, they "saved" him.

Grace comes from the places we least expect.

We are surely invited to give cups of cold water to the little ones of our world.

And we are also invited to receive cups of cold water, as little ones ourselves.

And in every small action, in even the smallest of actions, in giving and receiving, we will be set free.

We will be made new; we will meet Jesus.

And that is worth everything.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

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I refer to Alan Roxburgh's book *Missional*; The story of the church in Toronto is recounted by Cheri DiNovo in *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing a Community*.