

Matthew 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."

On Wednesday afternoon, the sun glowed bright orange, an oven range's eye just hanging in a sweaty Carolina sky; its heat made the coastal sand sizzle. Despite all of the sun's posturing, a blueish-green ocean went on about its business, sucking in salty waters, and exhaling them out in foamy tubes that raced to the shore, colliding violently with worn-down shells, and spraying the white beach with a thin, cool mist. A little further up the shoreline sat a gaggle of Stillermans (safely social-distanced of course!) decorating their squatter's plot with beach chairs, twisted towels, sand-sculpting tools, a half-dozen coolers, some soft, some constructed of hardened plastic, and several beach bags.

And yes, of course the beach was an oasis – it was the whole reason for coming! But those coolers and bags, wow those coolers and bags are what I'm thinking about this morning – they were like mobile Seven-Elevens: lotion for the sun-struck; Capri-Suns, Cokes, and Coronas for the thirsty; Cheez-its, Cheetos, Cheerios, carrots, and cookies for the hungry; towels, sunglasses, diapers, wipes, hats, lottery tickets, breath mints for the naked. And even though it was only for an afternoon, this little makeshift economy modeled a beautiful form of hospitality. Bring whatcha got. Y'all use what you want. No need to settle up. We've got plenty.

And I'm thinking about sand, and shells, and water, too. I must have counted three-dozen children searching for sea treasures – clam shells, broken conchs, sand dollars, anything that shines – and somehow, every, single one of those youngsters, mine included, found bucketfuls. The same will be true tomorrow and the next day and the next. I was just as amazed to see that despite hundreds of

sandcastle builders, there was no shortage of sand and pebbles. And somehow, someway, every bodysurfer found waves to suit them.

What I noticed was a fleeting moment of tangible manna – here was a scenario where people were not acting purely out of a need for consumption, or more specifically with the belief that reward for generosity/hospitality is the right to consume more, or get more, or have more. In this instance, reward was a contentedness and fullness birthed in community. My reward for sharing a bag of Doritos was not a \$1 return on my investment, nor was it that my cousin was gonna let me have some of her aloe so I didn't have to walk three blocks back to the house to get mine...my reward, our reward, was the ability to meet one another's needs in the present, and experience that gift together. In this instance, relaxation, laughter, conversation, and nourishment of mind, body, and soul.

But this manna was surrounded by some things that were very un-manna-like (is that even a word?!?). Occasionally, in the vast ocean in front of us, we could see a cargo ship, or a commercial fishing vessel; on one end of the island we noticed a few glass bottles and paper wrappers carelessly discarded in natural habitats; behind us huge houses with private gates and private beach accesses donned no trespassing signs – all of these things little reminders of how us humans tend to carve up and chip away at God's abundance, too worried our rewards will be gone if we don't look out for own needs first.

And my mind drifts westward, back up State Road 74, and to the meetinghouse. We have our own little strip of Crystal Coastline right here. I think about our potlucks, the supper kind, and the worship kind, too. Bring whatcha got. Y'all use what you want. No need to settle up. We've got plenty. Give what you can give today – your voice, your song, your tithes, your prayers, your presence, your attention, your smile; sometimes there's a lot, sometimes not so much. No matter, we blend it all together, and we get a warm plate of community.

But nice as our little beach full of manna is, there's too much of that un-manna-like stuff around us. Across the street you'll find a high school that serves gourmet lunches to rival Dean and Deluca. And yet two blocks down in either direction, you'll find schools where a sizable number of students, perhaps even a majority,

most likely don't have access to lunch when school's not in session. And I would wager, that within a quarter-mile radius of us, a nice firm slice of the wealthy wedge, public and social services – police, fire, power, EMS, GrubHub, public transit, Uber – would all come a running if we ever needed them. It's funny though, our city's hospitality and dependability get a little less consistent when you stray into the outer crescent. And y'all, each one of you are some of the kindest, most warm-hearted, generous people I have ever met, but making a left turn out of our church driveway sure will reduce our threshold for grace!!!

What I am getting at is that we create pockets of beloved community, but our pockets keep getting swallowed up by the trousers of individualism. We aren't blind, and the problem isn't subtle. It's never been. In every age, people have struggled with the idea of pursuing manna over excess, contentedness over reward. Sometimes, really most of the time, when we consider pursuing the work of God's world rather than the work of Caesar's, we can be overwhelmed. Creating systemic change is long, and slow, and arduous, and often intangible. And based on the last few weeks of readings, this gospel pursuit Jesus is inviting disciples and apostles into sounds pretty hard; it even comes with persecution, and there's not even a per diem for travel expenses.

And in this day and age, where all of our energy is focused on resolving the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and institutionalized racism (and rightfully so!), I think we have the tendency to read the latest chapters of Matthew's gospel and hear a call to heroism rather than discipleship. Jesus isn't asking us to invent a silver bullet, or even stand in front of bullets; Jesus is asking us to live in such a way that, together, as righteous, empathetic people, we create communities that don't need buzzer-beating rescues from systemic oppression. Today, Jesus says, "Welcome those who come in my name; share your canteen if you've got one."

When we welcome others, we greet them, we learn their names, we offer hospitality when we are hosts, we receive hospitality when we are guests. We let our hearts illumine our actions rather than letting our brains dilute our compassion. We don't offer kindness in order that someone might become indebted to us, we offer kindness because we too know what it feels like to be

Let's Pack a Cooler
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Proper 8, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 6/28/2020
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a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

hungry, or thirsty, or new, or lonely, or tired, or anxious, or displaced. And the reward is not dependence on a system, but rather independence in God.

I mean, really, think about how cool this is – Jesus says giving a cold drink of water to a stranger is the kind of thing that facilitates the inbreaking of God's kingdom. We know how to be hospitable, ya'll!!! What we've got to spend our time working on is where and when to be hospitable.

So wherever you are today, whatever your beachhead may be, consider your source of hospitality. Then think about those manna deserts that surround you. Grab a water bottle, grab a ladle, grab whatcha got, and be ready and willing to offer it to the neighbors you encounter. And what you ask, is your reward? You might just be surprised to find community in the highways and byways of your journey. Let's pack a cooler.

May it be so, and may it be soon!