

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

June 26, 2005

Sermon Text: Matthew 10:40-42

We have had so much beautiful singing today, and Myra reading the Scriptures with perfect articulation and emphasis, I think that's the first time I properly understood Romans 6:12-23. I hesitate to even begin to try to preach, but that is my call and so I will.

I once went to visit a woman who was getting ready for surgery the next day, and most of you know the drill, no water, nothing by mouth from evening until the next day. Well, sometimes that next day gets long if the surgery gets changed, and you know the schedule does get interrupted by emergencies, and it might go from 6:00 p.m. one evening until about 3:00 p.m. the next day without water, and that's an awful thing. Our bodies need an average of about 1.3 gallons per day just to stay healthy. That was information for the Salkehatchie workers, not to get dehydrated. Anyway, I checked on this lady, who did go from 6:00 p.m. one day until around 2:00 p.m. the next, and she was agitated, waiting for her surgery. One of my former members. She was agitated, and she wanted nothing more than a cup of cold water, and I did not give it to her. I couldn't. I tried to help. I asked, “Now, you do know why the nurses won't give you any water, don't you?” She said, “Yes, I know why they won't give me any water. Because they are hateful!” That's what she said. But the very minute it was safe for her to have a cup of cool water to quench her thirst, a compassionate nurse, and all the ones I've ever met are, gladly brought her some water.

Now, the Scripture today says that even a small act of giving a cup of cool water, even that, can be an act of Christ's love, and an act that rejoices up to Heaven. It's a Kingdom act, an echo of Christ's concern for others, and even such a small act attracts God's notice and is remembered and rewarded.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”. One of the lines that's famous is, “Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink” because it was salt water. Now, in that same poem, the line I'd like to focus on says, “He prayeth who loveth best all things great and small.” Now, it is easy to love the great things, the big things, and the big and the famous people. I'm reminded of the story of the Good Samaritan though. A man once asked Jesus the big question, the big question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “You know, love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul. Love your neighbor as yourself.” I mean, the guy answered Jesus that, and Jesus said, “Yes, that's right.” But the guy wanted to know one more thing. He wanted to know the bare minimum he had to do to inherit eternal life so he asked again, “All right, love God, love neighbor, love self, but tell me just who is my neighbor. I want to know just who is my neighbor. I don't want to love more than I have to.” That is precisely the moment when Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan. That's when he told the story, the point of which is, you can know the Bible inside and out, and you can even be ordained clergy, but if you can still look the other way when people are bleeding in the ditch, if you can convince yourself that it's their own fault and pass by wide on the other side, then God's love, God's love which leads to

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life eternal is not in you. The one who loves, the one who stops and shares and gets involved, is connected to God and to others. Small acts. Seemingly insignificant acts reveal that the love of God within us has melted our cold hearts, has given us warmth enough to act out our faith with God-powered compassion. Even a cup of cold water for the thirsty, given with compassion, gets God’s notice, and reveals a faith that will be rewarded. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Love God, love neighbor as you love yourself, and live like you mean it. The small acts that come from that faith will show even when you are not thinking about it. In fact, I’ve found that the more you think about things before you do them, the more you talk yourself out of doing those things, and end up doing nothing. Our culture celebrates power and money and influence and beauty. The same culture ignores the small, the ugly, the seemingly insignificant. The good mother, the faithful employee, the day laborer, the plain looking, the simply dressed, the common person, these are just faces in the crowd, sort of like extras in a movie set, non-essentials in our quest for perfection.

Writer John Killinger says the real test of religion is not how great we appear to be in the eyes of others or how rich or famous, but what we do in the small, barely noticed encounters of life. It is our stewardship of life in the little, unguarded moments that really determines who we are in the Kingdom of God. Dr. Killinger goes on to remind us of the story in the Book of Acts of Phillip who reached out to an Ethiopian in his time of need, and he brought him to know Christ, and tradition has it that this Ethiopian court official went back home, and was one of the founding members of the Coptic church, which influenced North Africa for Christianity all down through the centuries. You never know when a small act, a small act, revealing your faith and God’s compassion will touch another human heart, and will meet their thirst to believe again or to trust again or to hope again or to seek God again. Killinger goes on to say when we act in such sincere and unpretentious ways, without counting the cost, without any motives of self interest, without being on a glory kick, without wanting to see our name in lights every time we do something good and kind, then God blesses the little and apparently insignificant acts we do or the words we speak, and turns them into acts and words of great consequence. God uses the cup of cold water we give the beggar or the disciple as an occasion for the rejoicing of the angels. I can imagine, I like that picture, I can imagine, when we get it right, and our faith actually shows itself in love and compassion, that some angel, somewhere in Heaven, with the enthusiasm of Coach Shell Dula, says, “Yes, that’s what I’m talking about!” Maybe, even Jesus says, “Yes, that’s what I had in mind.”

The famous anthropologist, Margaret Meade, asked a question, was asked this question, the question was, “Dr. Meade, what was the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture?” Now, I love archeology, I spent a month on a dig in Georgetown with an Austrian archeologist once, and it’s a fascinating field, but Dr. Meade’s answer surprised me. Can you guess what the first sign of civilization was according to her?” She said it was not a clay pot, not a fishhook, not a grinding stone, not a weapon. Dr. Meade’s answer was a healed femur. A healed femur. She said the earliest sign of civilization was a healed femur. Now, the femur is the leg bone above the knee, and she explained that no healed femurs are found where there is no civilization, where the law of the jungle

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reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared, someone had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization. Imagine! Not great acts of engineering nor medicine nor agriculture, but the small act of taking care and bringing food and water to a man with a broken leg until it healed. That defines in her mind the very beginning of civilization, and that also defines caring for a neighbor who could not care for themselves and goes back to Jesus' story. Now, who are we supposed to do these small acts of kindness for? I'm afraid in our culture today, an insignificant act for an insignificant person counts for very little. Do you know a few years ago, a used piece of chewing gum, chewed by a major league baseball player was sold on Ebay for a couple of thousand dollars. It was. Was it anybody here? Okay. This morning I checked on Ebay, you can bid on a chewed piece of gum from an unknown struggling musician. The going price is \$.99. The auction closes tomorrow. Shipping is \$5.99. The gum isn't worth much because we don't think this unknown is worth very much. It's the same thing when we think that kind acts to important people seem to count for more than kind acts to the poor and the unknown, but Jesus looks at things differently. Even the unknowns of the world are known to him and loved by him. Jesus understood that the powerful could take care of themselves in worldly ways. It's the poor and the outcast who need the compassion of God's people. The compassion of God's people who act out of an obedience to God and out of an understanding that God loves them, whomever they are, just as much as God loves me. Sometimes all people, all people need is just a little love and encouragement to grow and try and to hope again. One teacher I had in high school was fond of yelling, "Wrong!" if you got the answer wrong, and you know, put downs and criticism. I had another teacher, I remember, who was actually related to the first teacher, and he was in the habit of saying, "Almost, almost, but not quite. Now try it this way." Now, that small, I consider it a Holy habit, of encouragement made a lasting difference to me. Imagine which one turned on my best efforts. Which one made me think I could do better. I was almost there instead of dead wrong! The good we do, whether large or small, should come from our faith within, and should reflect the love of Christ. As a Holy habit, not a thing to be seen. That is why Jesus says our prayers should be in private, not just to be seen by others. Our giving should be in secret, not just to be seen by others. The point is, we should pray, we should give, we should act in loving ways even when no one is looking because God is looking, maybe taking notes.

I want to ask you a few questions. Answer them in your head. Whose image are the poor made in? Who created the water to begin with, the food, the wealth of the world? Who is called to love as God loves? Did Jesus have compassion on people in need? What is the point of that Good Samaritan story? Christian faith is not that hard to understand. Yes, love God with your heart, mind and soul, and love yourself because God loves you and forgives you so you can, and love others even when no one is looking. God forgives you, freely, freely forgive others, and if you don't forgive them because you don't think they deserve it then you don't yet understand what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. No one deserves what Jesus did on the cross. It is a gift. It is grace. Out of gratitude for what God has done for us, for God's gift of love and life and grace, the Apostle Paul writes this to encourage out of gratitude these sorts of behaviors in Galatians 6:10, "So

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then as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men.” Hebrews 13:16, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” In Galatians 6:9, “And let us not grow weary in well doing for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.”

Too often, I see people whose faith never gets beyond their head. I remember when I was working at a campground in Myrtle Beach one summer, there was a man who stayed there the entire summer. He rented the entire summer, and he was a very demanding man. He was abusive to the staff. When I took our little golf cart around the grounds doing errands on the campground, I noticed that he was always, always, always studying the Bible, but he was nasty! Now, being at the time a first year seminary student and full of enthusiasm, I thought I might try to talk to him, and I stopped and I asked him what he was reading, what particular book, and he looked up at me like I was a wiggling roach in his milkshake. He did. He said, “This is God’s word. This is my personal study time for me, me, personal. I don’t want to be talked to or be bothered by anyone else. Understand? Goodbye!” He had all these colorful silk markers in his Bible. I’m not sure which passages he marked. I do understand this. Personal faith. It’s between me and God and none of your business. I was hearing him say that. My theology does not allow for other people. My faith does not need interaction with other people. It’s personal, it’s private, it’s solitary, it’s based on these words alone. It’s not life changing, spirit filled. It’s not an emulation or a continuation of Jesus’ ministry. Just words on a page. My Bible. My faith. Good day. Flat and cold, black and white, no random acts of kindness, no encouragement, and I think that he had the belief that when he died, God would owe him for his deep study. I don’t, I hope you don’t think I make up this attitude because there are people like this, and here’s the kicker, sometimes we are people like this. Jesus could have taught a faith like that, but he didn’t. Instead, God came in Christ to show us that the faith he was talking about was also a faith to be lived out, in compassion for the least and the lost and those who hunger and thirst, not only in theological and spiritual ways, but also for the basic necessities of life. Our faith and our works don’t have to be big. Listen to Jesus, “Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.” A cup of cold water, not a hard thing to do, but notice it’s cold, not lukewarm, a beautiful little extra touch, cool water. Yes, faith alone saves, but works alone prove that faith lives in your heart. Jesus also said, “By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit.” That means good works! Bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. The good works, the fruit proves you are indeed his disciple. A good work in God’s eyes springs from our obedience to God’s Holy Spirit within. God nudges, and we either respond or we deny. John Wesley said, “Do all the good you can in all the ways you can to all the people you can as long as ever you can.” Serve God by serving others, in ways large and small. Make the angels say, “Yes!” Amen.