

## Linked Together in Grace

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Matthew 10: 40-42

When I was in Seminary, at one point the powers that be in the Administration started sponsoring “events” to build “community.” Some of us didn't feel like we were lacking community, and so we resented these efforts. They seem contrived to us. We felt like community really was a gift, a mystery given by God and that it really couldn't be artificially made to happen. And there's a certain deep truth to that, of course, but as I think back on it now, and particularly in the context of today's lesson from Matthew, I think that that truth of the mystery and “giftedness” of community that we were clinging to, was beside the point! The deeper truth, which apparently the administration had grasped, was that we should be listening to those among us who didn't feel part of any community. Because, if we were listening to them, we just might have been hearing the voice of God, calling us to true hospitality. I think now, it could have been God trying to give the deep mystery of God's community, even through human contrivance, and we who were blocking it.

Maybe it was something like that, that Matthew was dealing with in his church. Reading the concerns of the church into the way he tells this story of Jesus' laying out the mission to the disciples leads me to think that some in the church wanted to make it all about “righteousness.”

Some in the church wanted to make this journey with Christ, called discipleship about “righteousness.” And you know what that means. That means they wanted to make it about themselves. Because, you know how it is. Most of the time when people want to make something about meeting certain *standards*, the standards that are set are ones that they think *they've* already met.

So, reading between the lines of this text, reading behind it, you can hear the debate about who's really in, and who's not... who's really *accepted* Jesus and who hasn't. So, says Jesus through Matthew, his gospeler, it's both a lot easier than you think, on the one hand, and maybe on the other hand, a lot harder. Because, he says, it's about hospitality. “Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me...” Or, as Peterson translates it: “We are intimately linked in this harvest work. *Anyone* who accepts what you do, accepts me. ...Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help.” With the exception of simply being open to one another, which was perhaps the hardest thing for them to do, Jesus seems to be saying it's out of your hands.

You *are* intimately linked in the harvest work *God* is doing. Jesus seems to be telling them here in his final words before they're sent on their mission, it's not about you. It's not about your notions of righteousness. “It's about what I'm doing in the midst of you.” We are forever tempted to make things about us. It's just so pervasive with us, isn't it? That's why holiness and righteousness get defined the way they do so often. Because, if it's about us, we have to define those things in terms of what we have control over. So, “holy” behavior gets defined mainly in terms of what the “holy” people avoid!

That's something more easily controlled, right? We can avoid certain people ... people behaving in ways that are understood as disreputable or sinful. And “righteousness” becomes the quality of being “right.” Because, of course, it's a quality easily demonstrated by avoiding contact with anything or anyone who might in any way be “wrong.” Those democrats, or those republicans, those blacks, those homosexuals, those pro-choice people, those anti-abortion people, those illegal immigrants. Real contact and dialogue with “those people” can be easily enough avoided.

Sarah Dylan Breuer has pointed out that “Underneath these ways of being “holy” and “righteous” in our culture lies a deep and simmering anxiety, a sense that what is pure and good in the world and in the people who live in it is extremely rare, profoundly fragile, and constantly under threat.” Best to try to keep it protected... in ourselves, in our church, in our community, in our nation. You never know. One moment of contact with someone or something “less than” and you're contaminated. And all your work to maintain certain standards is for naught.

We're talking about self-justification here. Because we keep thinking it's about us. Which is why, you remember in that story in John 4 about the Samaritan woman at the well, why she was so surprised that Jesus asked her for a drink! Anyone, assuming that it's finally about us, and that what's pure and good is rare and constantly under threat would know that such contact would bring about transformation of the worst kind. An impure woman's touch makes the cup impure, and drinking from that would make even a prophet—even the Messiah—impure, too! That is, if it's about us, and what we do... then it's about how far away from the “right” standard this woman is, and what a pristine example of the “right” standard Jesus is.

If it's about us. No, says Jesus, it's about God! It's about the love of God, ever pouring out, that already links us all together! It's about just letting yourself be a part of that! Letting yourself be part of life. God is forming community through this all-inclusive love, through radical hospitality... hospitality extended willy-nilly to all. Says Jesus: “We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone one who accepts what you do, (that is, telling the good news of God's love for them, helping them, healing them, touching the outcasts) accepts me.” And further, “Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help...” and “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to you...” they're in this adventure called the Kingdom, too!

You see, going back to that story about the Samaritan woman at the well, making Jesus impure, isn't what happens, because it's not *about* her! What happens is that Jesus' hospitality toward this woman radiates throughout the entire village. People are caught up in *God's* true, contagious righteousness; they're caught up in the perfection God shows in showering blessings of sun and rain on “righteous” and “unrighteous” alike without distinction. That's God's holiness and God's righteousness. And far from being fragile, that radical hospitality and indiscriminate love is *the* most fundamental, powerful and lasting force in the world.

And lest we think that only God, that only Jesus could show that kind of powerful, contagious love, today's lesson from Matthew lays the axe to that notion. Anyone who accepts you, who *accepts* the help and the message of indiscriminate love, accepts me. Anyone who gives you a cup of cold water is deserving of the same reward as you all going out doing my work. It's because that reward is simply the experience of life linked together in God's love. It's not about us. It's about what *God* is doing through us and between us if we'll just be open to it, and open to each other. So, I think something as simple as the refreshment hour we offer after worship on Sundays is a parable of the kingdom. Will you come and just share in the community and relationship that's just offered to you there? Will you come and just be open enough to receive those free gifts of hospitality and welcome?

Andrew Greeley tells the story of a kind of worthless teenage boy. I mean he never did much wrong, but he never did much right either. He got the kind of grades which would just barely get him into college. He helped out around the house only when he had to. He loafed on his job, doing only enough so that he wouldn't get fired. He was a good athlete, but he never went out for any of the teams. He avoided all school projects. Everyone said he was lazy. He didn't deny that he was. He defended himself by saying that life was boring. He

spent all his time reading adventure stories and romances which weren't boring. The priest in his parish said that he was one of the best young men of the XIII century. He told the priest that he wished he had a time machine so he could go back to that century and serenade lovely damsels on their balconies at night.

WELL, somewhere along the line, despite all the "right" standards that he wasn't living up to, he caught a glimpse of what God was doing in him and in the world, and one spring he announced he was going to South America for the summer as a volunteer to work with the poor people up in the mountains. What good will you do for them, his mother said. It's a waste of time his father said, you should be home earning money for your college tuition. It's really BORING work said his teachers. It's not medieval Seville, said the priest.

His parents practically forbid him to go and refused to pay for his plane fare. But, he took all the money from presents out of his account and went anyway. And you know what happened? The people in the mountain village where he worked loved him, they welcomed him, and they said they never knew anyone who worked so hard. The priests reported back to his parish priest that this kid was one of the finest human beings they had ever known. He returned home his eyes glowing with excitement. He didn't care what anyone said. He would return next summer.

See, it wasn't about him. It was about God. It's about what God is doing in the world. We are linked by God's indiscriminate grace and we can be part of that through simple hospitality. It's a large work, but we don't have to be overwhelmed. We can start small, a cup of cold water, given or received. Some refreshments after worship, given or received. We're all included. Thanks be to God!