

“ONE COLD CUP”

A sermon preached by
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Fordyce First United Methodist Church
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Matthew 10:40-42^a ⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent^b me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in a prophet’s name gets a prophet’s pay, and whoever welcomes a righteous^c person in a righteous^d person’s name gets a righteous^e person’s pay. ⁴² So whoever would give one of these little ones a cup of cold water to drink, only in the name of a disciple, truly I’m telling you, no, he won’t lose his pay.”

When I was a kid, I must have watched *Snoopy, Come Home* a gazillion times. Do you remember that? It’s been a while since I saw it, but I remember that Snoopy left Charlie Brown to go see a little girl, who was sick in the hospital.

What I remember the most was something that happened over and over again to Snoopy on his trip. Everywhere he went, he saw a sign. He saw it at the bus station. He saw it on a train. He saw it outside the library. When he finally got to the hospital to see his sick friend, it was there too. Do you remember what it said? “NO DOGS ALLOWED.”

I bet all of us know how Snoopy felt. We’ve all been excluded. We wanted to join a club, but they wouldn’t let us in. We wanted to be friends with someone, but they didn’t like us. We wanted to go somewhere with a group, but they didn’t want us to go with them. We were too fat or too skinny, too ugly or too pretty, too poor or too wealthy, too young or too elderly to fit in.

The sad thing is, we have all been on the other side too. When we are excluded, sometimes we lash out and exclude others. I had a skating party for my eleventh birthday. Mom told me how many friends I could invite, and I started making my list. There was this kid. We hung out with the same friends, but we didn’t like each other. He was a bully.

Mom and Dad said I should invite him. They said doing something nice for him might make things better. I didn’t invite him, though. I didn’t want to invite a bully to my party, so I left him off the list. The invitations went out, and my friends started talking about it at school. The kid comes up to me – the one I didn’t like – and he says, “You didn’t invite me?” I said, “No.” He said, “I didn’t want to come anyway.”

I will never know what would have happened if I had invited him. I know he kept on bullying me as long as I lived there. In my heart, I knew I didn’t do the right thing. It’s bad for your soul when you take the easy road and “do unto others as they would do unto us.”

We do it in the church too. “That’s not how *we* dress.” “That’s *my* pew.” “You can’t do *that* here.” Sometimes we’re not so vocal about it, but it shows up in our thoughts and attitudes. It never *occurs* to us to invite that person to church with us. They don’t fit our image of a proper church member. They’re not well enough educated or they’re too poor or their skin’s the wrong color to fit in here. God has a place for them somewhere, but they’re not welcome here.

I heard a story about a guy; he had been praying for this elderly gentleman to come to church. He had invited the older man many times, but he never came. The man was well-respected and honest. He acted like a Christian should act, but he never went to church.

One day, his friend asked him if he had ever been to worship. The man paused, and then his face twisted into a frown. He said he grew up in a large family. Even after the Depression, they had trouble putting food on the table and clothes on the children.

He said he was about ten years old when one of his friends invited him to go to church. He went. He enjoyed Sunday school. He loved singing the songs and hearing those great Bible stories. He had never heard anyone read the Bible to him before. But at the end of class, the teacher came over and said, "Son, please don't come again dressed like that. We want to look our best when we come into God's house." He thought a moment and said, "No, ma'am. I won't ever."

The gentleman told his friend, "And you know what? I never did." Later on, the friend said, "What if that church would have thought, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me'? ... Yes, I saw him in the church house for the first time on Wednesday, and I cried as I looked at the immaculately dressed old gentleman lying there in his casket. He was looking his best. But all I could think of were those words of an impressionable little ten-year-old boy echoing in my mind, 'No, ma'am. I won't ever.'"^f

That's bad enough, but what do you expect? Some of the deepest wounds dividing the Christian family today happened because Christians don't even welcome each other. Methodists are as guilty as anybody. John Wesley hated slavery, and many blacks found a religious home in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Blacks and whites worshiped together in Philadelphia at St. George's Methodist Church, but all that changed one day at a worship service. While people were praying at the rail, some of the trustees (who were all white) went over and asked some of the black folks to get up and make room for the white folks to pray. Richard Allen led the black folks right out of the building and formed the African Methodist Episcopal (or A.M.E.) Church. A similar thing happened in New York, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Zion) was formed.

It's a shame, isn't it, when Christians don't welcome one another? There was a time when Christians weren't welcome at all. The first Christians were kicked out by their family and friends. The earliest Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. During his journeys, Paul went to the synagogue first to preach and teach. It wasn't long, however, before the Christians got kicked out of the synagogue. Then the Romans turned on us and outlawed our faith. If anyone should know what it feels like to not be welcomed, it's us.

Jesus must have known that would happen. Listen again to what he told his disciples: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Jesus knew that some people would not accept his disciples. What do you expect? People didn't show Jesus a very warm welcome either.

The early Christians did what I should have done as a kid – when they weren't welcome, they still welcomed others. They did what Jesus told them to do; they loved their enemies and prayed for those who persecuted them. They cared for the poor and the sick and the needy. We Methodists started orphanages and schools. We taught illiterate people how to read. We cleaned up the prisons. We fought to abolish slavery. We still fight for basic, civil and human rights for all people, for men and women, for people of faith and people of no faith, for the old people and young people, for black people and white people, for our friends and for our enemies. We welcome everyone to the Lord's Table because we remember what Jesus said: "whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.."

As our slogan says, "Our doors are always open." Everyone is welcome here. Everyone has a place here. All of us probably remember Bill. Bill came into church one day; it was a very conservative church. Everyone was dressed to the nines. Bill looked like he just woke up. His hair was wild. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, no shoes. He came in late – the preacher was about to start preaching. He was looking for a seat. The sanctuary was packed that day. He

came all the way down the center aisle. People were shifting in their seats, trying to fill in any spare space.

With no room in the pews, Bill decided to do what they did at college. He just plopped right down on the carpet in front of the pulpit, Indian style. Nobody knew what to do. Finally, a sensible, gray-haired gentleman in a nice, brown three-piece suit starts walking down the aisle. Cane in hand, he ambled down front. Everyone watched to see what the man would do, what he would say. Suddenly, his cane fell, and with great difficulty, the elderly man got down on the floor and took his place beside Bill.^g

That's what church is about. It's not about what we wear or how we look. It's not about sitting in my favorite spot. It's not about the songs we sing or having no typos in the bulletin. It's about humbling ourselves, about putting the needs of our guests above our own needs. It's about welcoming the stranger in hope that one day Jesus will say to us, "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

^a Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^b Literally, *having sent*.

^c Or *just*.

^d Or *just*.

^e Or *just*.

^f Retold by David Wiggs, *Who Needs a Welcome?*, www.preachingtoday.com.

^g Lew Gervais, director of Pressing Onward support groups; quoted in *Men of Integrity* (3.2).