

Proper 8A  
Matthew 10:40-42  
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*Thirsty?*

Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*“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.”*

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Have you ever been thirsty? Now I know that it might seem like a silly question, but give it a moment's pause. Have you ever been thirsty? Hot, sweaty, tired, even your muscles, even your skin feeling parched, in-desperate-need-of-a-cool-drink, thirsty? Summertime thirsty?

In middle and high school, I, like my father before me, cut grass to make money. I was often reminded that dad had cut 40 plus lawns a week when he was in high school, but the twelve I cut seemed like more than enough! There was one yard in particular that I actually looked forward to – The Arthur's. They had a pretty white house with shapely shrubs, and vibrant flowers and very little shade. I cut the grass and bagged the grass and did the trimming and whatever odd jobs they had for me that week and then I would knock on the back door – sweating and looking like my legs had

actually sprouted grass instead of hair! Filthy and smelling like gasoline and grass, Mrs. Arthur always welcomed me into the air-conditioned cool of her bright kitchen. She took a pitcher of ice tea from the refrigerator and filled a tall glass with ice and sat them in front of me. Under normal circumstances her syrupy sweet ice tea wouldn't have been my first choice, but I so looked forward to that glass, each and every week, and I relished those few minutes in the cool of her kitchen with the sweating glass of iced tea. I was thirsty and it tasted good.

Have you ever been thirsty?

A story said to originate in a Russian Orthodox monastery has an older monk telling a younger one: "I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road, and I say, 'Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?'"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus reminds us that when we welcome someone in, when we offer even a glass of cool water, we are ministering personally to him, and personally to the Divine. So, I wonder, does it matter how we hold open the door – how we offer that cup of cold water?

In downtown Minneapolis, like here in Aurora, there is significant homeless population and the churches in that area know something about welcoming and offering refreshment. A group of four congregations partner to provide meals on Sunday evenings when many of the regular soup kitchens are closed. The four congregations take turns opening the doors of their buildings and offering hospitality. If you were to get in the line of a certain one of those churches, you'd quickly discover that this isn't the kind of place where you just pick up a tray, get served by the hair-netted

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kauffman. "Welcoming the Stranger," Christianitytoday.com, February 22, 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/march/16.74.html>.

and white aproned people on the other side of a counter, follow the person in front of you to a sterile cafeteria table where you eat quickly and get out to make room for the next group. This isn't that kind of place.

Here you'd be ushered inside and invited to browse their free store for books and clothing. You'd be asked if you need hygiene supplies, baby goods, or pet food. And then you'd be taken by hand. A particular woman, always the same kind face and gentle hands, would massage your hands, as she massages everyone's hands, with moisturizing cream before inviting you to sit down at whatever white tablecloth-covered table you'd like to enjoy and delicious and hearty meal, served with dignity and genuine warmth. It's almost like the difference between a family meal and a hospital cafeteria. Which would you prefer?

Jesus reminds us that when we welcome someone in, when we offer even a glass of cool water, we are ministering personally to him, and personally to the Divine. Does it matter how we hold open the door – how we offer that cup of cold water? Would it matter to you?

In our new Vision Statement, we at New England Church, we say that, “with a rich tradition of inclusivity and diversity, we welcome all people—regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, mental or physical ability, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, family/marital status, or political perspective—to create community with us.”<sup>2</sup>

I really truly believe we mean those words. More than believing these words, we try our best to embody these words, to create a truly welcoming space, but have you ever been to a place that doesn't? That says that all are welcome, but that doesn't make you

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<sup>2</sup> “Strategic Vision.” Adopted by Cabinet February 27, 2023.

*feel* welcome at all? Congregations and communities of all kinds have to go beyond saying it, go beyond meaning it, to actually *doing* welcome.

Over the last year, we've engaged in conversations about "Visioning Our Future" as a congregation. During those conversations, you've stated a desire to welcome children, youth, families, elders, neighbors, and members of neighboring towns into this space to build community together; to meet people where they are and create opportunities for learning, spiritual enrichment, and fellowship; to be a leader in our city, committed to outreach, passionate about social justice, and reaching out to partner with others in order to care for those who need it most. These statements serve as further evidence that New England Church truly wants to go beyond saying that folks are welcome, to actually *doing* welcome.

Jesus reminds us that when we welcome someone in, when we offer even a glass of cool water, we are ministering personally to him, and personally to the Divine. It is good to welcome. It is good to offer the cup, the hospitality, the care. It is good to do these things, but it is also good, and really absolutely necessary to think about *how* we welcome and how we offer the cup. Does it matter how we hold open the door – how we offer that cup of cold water? I think it does.

In her musings on this text, Anna Carter Florence, a preacher I heard a few years ago at the festival of homiletics, asks this: "If Jesus were coming to [a meal] tomorrow, what would *you* hope might happen? How would you set up the space?"<sup>3</sup> How would *you* serve him, offer him hospitality, make him feel welcome, make him feel wanted, make him feel at home?

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Carter Florence. "Preaching Matthew 10:40-42," Goodpreacher.com, June 22, 2011.

It's worth asking and it's worth thinking about. Because when *we*, when *you* welcome someone, when you offer someone the cup, you welcome Jesus, and when you welcome Jesus, you welcome the very presence of the Divine. May ours be a welcome that would make God herself feel right at home among us. Amen.