



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

A Cup of Cold Water

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Chief of Parish Ministries,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 2, 2017, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 10:40-42

Hard to believe, but here we are, already in the middle holiday weekend of the summer. Today is the Sunday closest to July 4, when we celebrate our country's 241st anniversary of Independence. This holiday weekend is traditionally a time for hot dogs and hamburgers and, shall we say, "other refreshments," concerts and fireworks. It's also—and maybe even more so this year—a time to reflect on who we are and where we are as a country, on what our country is and what it should be. Especially after this past year of extraordinary division and challenges, this July 4 may be a time to consider how each of us might act, with love and integrity rather than hate, to help our country, collectively, live up to its ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, of freedom and justice for all.

Fear not. I am not going to offer a political analysis in this sermon. I'm going to preach on our Gospel text. However, the Gospel is not separate from the life we live as Christians. Our diocesan bishop, Bishop Andy Dietsche, in a recent address to our Diocesan Wardens' Conference, noted: "The church is part of the body politic. The church has a place and voice in the larger sphere. The church is political, but not partisan. The church is called to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ." [1]

I offer you this definition of politics, given to me by my beloved former ballroom dance teacher: "Whenever you have more than one person together, you've got politics."

As has been true from Christianity's earliest beginnings, following Jesus is about gathering in community, as we're doing here. But it's not about staying in church, even a gorgeous one like this. We gather in community, and then we are sent out—out into the world around us. We are to take what we receive here at this holy table out these doors and share it with those who need it so desperately.

Equally, we are to welcome the stranger at our gate, the stranger among us. We are to offer room in the inn, a place at the table, a place where each of us can be transformed by God's grace.

Today's Gospel: these few short verses from Matthew. The word WELCOME stands out, maybe especially to us St. Bartians. Welcome has, thankfully, become a hallmark of St. Bart's. We're not always perfect at it, but we keep trying, and we've gotten better at it over the years.

I've mentioned before that I find studying the scriptures with others an incredibly rich and deep experience. I learn a lot from hearing others' questions and viewpoints, which are so often different from my own. This past week in our Wednesday mid-day Bible Study, we had two visitors from Canada. Their presence and thoughtful comments were great gifts to our group.

Our Bible Study starts with brief silence and prayer. Then we read the upcoming Sunday scriptures around the table, with each person reading a verse or so. In this way, we hear the scriptures in many different voices.

Then, as we like to say, we leave room for the Holy Spirit to work, and off we go. We never know what the path will be or where we'll end up. That Holy Spirit ... we never know where She will take us!

"A cup of cold water." That seems like such a simple, basic thing. Not a huge quantity of water, just a cup. A cup is not much. Water is the one thing our body needs above all else. We humans can last only about three days without water. A cup of cold water could save a life. A cup of cold water can revive, refresh, bring comfort, even new life.

In Jesus' time, even a cup of cold water would have required a lot of effort. It would have been drawn up from a well or fetched from a spring. We who live in the relatively rainy eastern part of our country can easily take water for granted. I did, until I lived in the West for several years. Those who live in the western part of our country cannot take water for granted. Even in our own time, a cup of clean cold water is still a precious commodity ... in Syria, in Sudan, even in Detroit.

Last Sunday, here in the city, we had the Pride March. It starts about 11am. Each year the crowds of those marching have grown larger. That means groups have to wait longer to enter the march from their lineup spots. The church groups are scheduled toward the end of the march to give us time to finish our Sunday morning services. St. Bart's and other church groups' entry time this year was 6-6:30 pm, finishing about 9:30 pm.

One of our sister Episcopal churches, Ascension, is located on Fifth Avenue and 10th Street, directly on the March route, near the end. For many years, from the sidewalk in front of that church, the people of Ascension and other Episcopalians have given cups of cold water to the Pride marchers, hot and thirsty from hours in the summer heat and humidity. I have gratefully accepted their water myself. This year, a member of that church reported they handed out 25-26 thousand cups of cold water, each with a lemon slice. A practical, tangible sign of welcome and hospitality and—dare I say it—evangelism.

A cup of cold water. Basic health care. Water for a thirsty soul.

Our Bible Study group's reflections on a cup of cold water moved quickly into a discussion of the Health Care Act currently under consideration by our country's Senate, and then to our country's health care system in general.

Important to note: our group members hold different opinions on pretty much everything. We have only two guidelines: 1) One person speaks at a time so we can all hear everything that's said; and 2) Whatever opinion is expressed, that opinion is respected, even if not agreed with. This year, we've also explicitly committed to speaking and listening respectfully to each other. Even if our country is having a hard time doing that, we have resolved to speak and act respectfully to each other in that room for the hour we are together.

The group's reflections and questions bubbled up like this: A cup of cold water. Basic decent health care. Who should have access to basic decent health care?

What happens if we, as followers of Jesus, speak and act from a Gospel perspective rather than a partisan perspective? The Gospel isn't partisan.

How do we honor—and continue—our Anglican and Episcopal heritage as a church in the public square? What makes a great city of the world a place where people want to live? Not just visit, but live, dwell, abide. Isn't one mark of a great society how it cares for its most vulnerable members?

We noted that individuality, rugged individualism, is part of our country's DNA. You may have heard the saying: "To be American is to have an authority problem." So, in our country's culture of rugged individualism, who will speak for the collective? Who will speak for the good of all ?

This past Friday afternoon at the Bronx-Lebanon Hospital, not far north of here, a disgruntled former employee smuggled a gun into the hospital and opened fire, killing one person and seriously wounding five others before setting himself on fire, and when that didn't work, finally shooting himself to death. [2]

A horrific scene of destruction suddenly unfolding in this busy hospital, a place devoted to healing. Despite the terror and danger to themselves, doctors and nurses and hospital workers immediately leapt into action, treating their wounded colleagues right where they fell, then as soon as possible rushing them to safety or to the operating room. Doctors and nurses and hospital workers did not act first in their own self-interest. They acted first to help the wounded and protect the patients and others in their care. First responders did what they are highly trained and called to do. None of these—doctors, nurses, hospital workers, first responders—stopped to ask the religious affiliation, political views, citizenship, age, race, orientation, or anything else about the people they rushed to help. Nor did the people being helped ask any of these things about those who were helping them.

A cup of cold water.

A cup of cold water offered on a hot day. A life-saving intervention. A heroic rescue. A simple kind word. An act of kindness. Listening. Simply listening. Listening without argument. Any act that respects the dignity of another human being.

A cup of cold water can take many forms.

When we welcome someone, whether stranger or friend, we are welcoming Jesus.
And perhaps entertaining angels unaware, as our Bible Study group found this past week.

When we give a cup of cold water, we see the face of Jesus.

When someone gives us a cup of cold water, we see the face of Jesus.

A cup of cold water, given or received, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

[1] <https://vimeo.com/222722547>

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/nyregion/bronx-hospital-shooting.html?_r=0