

We'll Keep the Light on for You

[Text - Matthew 10:40-42]

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Matthew is a tax collector, who in addition to collecting taxes for the Roman government, also collects some marvelous stories about Jesus for the early Christian Church. In a world where many are illiterate, Matthew - as a tax collector - not only knows how to read and write, he can also keep a precise ledger. He's like a First-Century *Quick-Books* wizard! Therefore, he carefully gathers, organizes and configures his Gospel account in a specific order. Matthew places most of Jesus' teachings in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, which we now call "The Sermon on the Mount." He includes many of Jesus' miracles in chapters 8 and 9, highlighting Christ's power and authority. Then in chapter 10, Matthew presents a systematic spread-sheet detailing the call, the work, and the cost of discipleship. Matthew Chapter 10 lays-out the essential tasks and techniques that Jesus expects of his followers, as they take his message to various communities throughout Israel.

They are to preach and teach and heal. They are to live simply and travel lightly. They are to gladly receive any hospitality extended to them; and to be prepared for any hostility directed against them. As we heard in last Sunday's New Testament reading, they are to "take-up the cross" and follow in the Way of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus sends his followers into the towns and villages of Judea, he tells them that whoever welcomes them, welcomes Jesus himself. And whoever welcomes Jesus, also welcomes the Holy One who Jesus fully represents. It's kind of like the modern-day ambassador. By welcoming the ambassador of a nation, one is - by extension - essentially welcoming the leader of that nation, and opening the door for a mutual exchange of ideas, commodities and continuing relationships. Therefore, as people welcome Jesus' disciples into their homes and communities, not only are they extending hospitality, they're also receiving the extravagant hospitality of Divine love and

grace. They're opening themselves to the Divine compassion, wholeness and peace, which is embodied in Jesus himself.

Now, what this means for you and me today, is that whenever you and I practice genuine hospitality, the mutual blessings that result will be greatly multiplied. Those of us who have participated in our Hunger Meals, or Family Promise Hospitality Events, or in any other activity of compassionate welcome and service, understand how this works. Not only do the people who receive our gifts of food and time and attention benefit from our efforts, but we ourselves are also tremendously blessed. We get to know people who we would otherwise not. Sometimes, they openly share with us their hopes and dreams, their struggles and concerns. They remind us of how fragile Life can be in these still-shaky economic times, and how fortunate you and I truly are. These experiences show us the magnificent nature of the Divine Magnification of giving and receiving - vividly demonstrating the multiple, mutual blessings that come from extending Divine Hospitality.

Hospitality has always been a central part of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith practices. The call to welcome the stranger is echoed throughout our shared Scriptures, and is considered an authentic measure of our faithfulness to God. Since there were no Middle-Eastern Best Western Hotels back in Jesus' day, weary travelers - when they arrived in a town in the evening - would simply sit by the community well and wait. It was then incumbent upon the townspeople to feed and house those travelers for the night. They were usually unknown to the community. They were often foreigners, who wore different clothing, spoke different languages, and perhaps even worshiped different gods. So the opening of one's home to them may seem, to us, a bit bold. Of course today we'd consider it a bit foolish, or downright dangerous! So, even though the human need for hospitality remains a constant, the suspicious fear of the stranger is an ever-increasing condition - which is truly unfortunate.

One of my responsibilities, and privileges, as Pastor of this congregation is to welcome those strangers who stop by or call the church seeking help. In your name and in the name of Christ, I try to assist them in ways that are compassionate, appropriate and discerning. There are *some* who seek to take advantage of our hospitality - who concoct elaborate stories about critically ill out-of-state relatives that they have to go visit; horribly mean landlords who are ready to toss them into the streets; or catastrophic Life-situations that make the Bubonic Plague seem like a bucolic picnic. Sometimes it's hard to decide whether I should give them help, or give them an Oscar for best actor in a Dramatic Performance! Nevertheless, there are two basic things I try to keep in mind:

First of all, most of these people really do need help - even those who are trying to scam us.

Secondly, it's better to err on the side of grace, than to give-in to jaded skepticism.

The message of Jesus Christ is quite clear: you and I joyfully give, *and* graciously receive, hospitality; and our response to those around us - particularly the outsider or stranger - is to be one of kindness and compassion rather than suspicion or fear. When I can remember that each person I meet truly is a beloved child of God, then my response will be gracious; even if it's to say, "No, I'm sorry, but I can't help you with that." Most of the time, I can help - in large part because of your generous donations to our Pastor's Fund. And much of the time, those who receive our help will say that they'll try to "pay it back" when they get back on their feet. I tell them I appreciate that; though often I will ask them instead, to simply "pay it forward" - that when the next opportunity arises for them to do something helpful for someone else - no matter how small the favor - they go ahead and do it. Sometimes, it's like a light switches on, as they realize, "Yes, that's something I really *can* do!" And I think that those who truly would want to pay us back, actually do find a way to "pay it forward".

Jesus says, "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...will not lose their reward." In other words, even the

smallest gesture of compassion or hospitality makes a positive imprint on the Cosmic Canvas of Life. And when the response to an act of kindness, is to carry that kindness forward, then the ripple effect of those blessings multiplies *exponentially*. It may sound a bit naive, but I believe the benefits of practicing “random acts of kindness” are extremely positive and powerful. So I’d like us to try an experiment.

I’d like each of us here today to make a conscious, concerted effort to do at least one special thing this week, for someone who we might normally pass-by. It doesn’t have to be anything big, just something to make us mindful of our daily opportunities to offer Divine grace to others. If we do this, I have a hunch that our week will go better for us, for those around us, and even for those unknown to us - who will reap the benefits of an expanding, positive energy. I also have a hunch that the Divine Source of *all* positive energy, compassion, and hospitality, will somehow *also* be quite pleased!