

Sermon – Mt. 10.4042

July 2, 2023, New Song Ep. Church

The Rev. Mel Schlachter

This is the capstone passage for an extended teaching by Jesus to his followers about what to do to spread their master's message, and what to expect. These words are rather like saying that, you may go without food and comfort in some days to come, but you deserve both, and those who give them to you will be giving them to Jesus and to God in their hospitality. This passage also addresses the need fifty years later to feed and water traveling missionaries during St. Matthew's own time.

Some of you may have hosted such itinerants in your church in years past, people who brought Christ Jesus to many places. There are still some who travel the Gospel around. Not long ago at Trinity we invited John Philip Newell one year and Belden Lane another, to help us go deeper in our faith. Of course some who would represent our Lord are available through Ticketmaster, but we don't often go there.

So who brings Christ to us now? Who is Christ in our midst for whom we need to support? They don't all have PhD's. In fact most make no pretense about being religious, or having anything to teach us. We meet them all the time. Some are homeless.

Barbara and I lived and ministered in the small Hudson Valley village of Staatsburg when a tall, slender neatly-kept man named Bill knocked on our door. He asked Barbara if the church had any paint jobs. He said he was a painter. A little worried, Barbara asked him to wait on the porch a little while till I got home and I would talk to him. He was carrying a gym bag and there was no car around.

I came home and met Bill. He told me he made his way by painting and did the church have any needs. I thought fast and decided to push him on it, and said yes, we have some exterior wooden soffits that need it; to which he agreed. It being late in the day, we lined up supplies and got ready for the next day.

He said he needed a place to stay and a meal. Was there anything in the village? This was getting complicated. Staatsburg had a tiny grocery store and a saloon that called itself an inn, serving some food too; and it turned out the saloon had a room upstairs with a bed in it. So we fixed Bill up for the night and spotted the bill.

The next day he put up the church's ladder, having donned the paint clothes that were in the gym bag, and started painting. He kept at it, did a good job, took him several days, and we

paid him a wage. It being a small walkable village, other people noticed what he was doing, and when he finished the church he had two other jobs lined up.

We all came to like Bill. Friendly and easy going, sociable but not long or deep on any subject. He now had a going business and folks told him he should stay in town.

In bits and pieces we learned that he had once worked on Wall Street, had a wife and kids, and ended up losing it all with a severe mental breakdown, the lingering effects of which I noticed. Now he was an itinerant painter.

After some weeks Bill announced that he was moving on. Everyone tried to convince him to stay, but he said he needed to move on. This was my first awareness of the sub-population that must travel, cannot make themselves stay in one place. "Foxes have holes...but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," someone said. So Bill gave us a cordial goodbye and was off on the road.

Shortly thereafter we moved to Troy, Ohio to be co-rectors once again of the church there. Half a year into it I got a call. "This is Bill. I understand you're in Ohio now. Do you have any paint jobs?" Of course I had a paint job! If I didn't have one I would have had him paint the leaves on the trees or something. In fact we were doing our house.

No doubt he had overheard our discussions about a possible move and kept a mental note. So on he came. We found our itinerant painter a basement room in a nearby downtown building. Trouble was he was not in favor of how I was taking off all the old paint, so he only tolerated the job a couple of weeks. Before he got on the road he asked us to hold onto a small box of personal effects for a while.

A few months later I got a call from Bill's brother, telling me that Bill had died and would I send him the box. He and I had a long conversation about Bill, sharing both of our experiences.

I met Christ and his name was Bill.

Sure, we helped out someone in need, but he taught us how to help someone. He made sure that we respected his dignity and his needs. We helpers are so accustomed to pigeon-holing people by category. Bill would not let us fit him into a category. We were as personal as limitations allowed. And then at some point we realized that we had been chosen to give this broken, holy man, one of those "little ones," a cup of cold water.

I am sure most of you have had the experience of feeling helped yourself even as you helped someone else, even that you got the bigger benefit. Our compassionate actions certainly need to be awake to that mysterious, unplanned reciprocity possible all the time.

Now our Gospel passage has a flip side, too. Yes, we give hospitality to friend and stranger, to Christ, and doing so is a lifetime commitment. However, sometimes we are the Christ figure, the window to God for someone. I am Bill.

Now you may think that's the clergy's role. If you were Roman Catholic, Orthodox or High Episcopalian the priest would be God's local rep. Don't get your hopes up. If so it's probably accidental. When people have come to me after some years and told me something I said was life changing for them, chances are good that I don't remember saying that, or it's a twist of something I did say, or it's the free association of someone otherwise bored with my sermon. All that shows me that Christ Jesus can still do miracles if we are honest, show up for work, and "respect the dignity of every human being." Maybe even when we don't.

There are people among us, however, through whom Christ's loving energy flows to all around them. Their honest humility is so great that they would seldom claim that.

More often, though, we are Christ-like because of our brokenness, our suffering whether visible or not. We are Bill, coping best we can with our limitations, often not aware of how we affect others. Sometimes our suffering easily draws sympathy and help; sometimes it is ugly or brutal and leads people to deny us, even three times. Either way we may push away help offered from others.

Our function at those times may be only to be a reminder to others of our common brokenness. Yet, let us receive at their hands that cup of cold water, let us let them carry our cross for a few steps, and may we surrender to God's desire to bring us healing grace.

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."