

If you know my wife Lyndsay pretty well, than you are probably aware that she is not a big fan of cold water. Whenever we go out to eat, when the waitress asks us what we would like to drink she always replies, “I’ll take a glass of water with no ice please!” For whatever reason, from the moment I met her I have always been fascinated by her desire for room temperature water, especially since I enjoy my beverages cold.

This morning when we hear Jesus talking about a cup of cold water in our Gospel, it initially it doesn’t seem like a very big deal. We can get cold water whenever we want. At home, it's as easy as taking ice cubes from the refrigerator and filling up a glass. At work or school, refrigerated water fountains and water coolers are everywhere. Sit down in a restaurant, and a glass of cold water just appears. It's the one beverage you don't have to pay for — and often we don't even have to ask for it.

And yet, cold water is a big deal, especially way back in biblical times, it was a very big deal! Drinking cold water was a rare pleasure, it didn't happen all that often, and when it did, it just tasted so good! Drinking cold water back then meant that someone went to a lot of trouble for you. Running water hadn't been invented, of course. Nor had refrigeration.

A household's water supply came from the village well. It started out cool in the early morning when someone — usually a woman or a young girl in the family — walked down to the local water supply with a clay jar, filled it, and came staggering back with it balanced on her head. She would set the heavy clay jar in a shady space inside the house. As the hours went by, it lost that cool, crisp, fresh-from-the-well taste. By late afternoon (the time most thirsty dinner guests were likely to arrive) you were lucky if room-temperature water was what you had left. At that time of day, a room in a first-century Palestinian house was just about at its hottest. If someone provided you with a cup of cold water, it meant they got up, ran

to the well and came back with fresh, cool water. A special trip, a special effort, for an honored guest. It's not a small thing at all.

Drinking cold water was also healthier than drinking water that had been sitting around for a day. Today's refrigerated water supply from an office water cooler or drinking fountain is plentiful. Most of us take it for granted. But we've forgotten something important, something our ancestors would have known all too well. The familiar appliances we know and love arose out of a pressing need — the need for sanitary drinking water in cities where typhoid was an ever-present scourge.

In fact, this is the reason the first drinking fountains were developed — it was a matter of disease prevention. In the mid-19th-century, in the city of London, a civic-minded philanthropists founded London's Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountain Association in 1867. Their first public fountain became immensely popular, being used by 7,000 people a day. Eventually the Foundation constructed 85 of them around the city.

Those were also the days when the Temperance movement was on the rise. Many of London's fountains were strategically placed outside public ale houses (or taverns), offering the city's working poor a free alternative to gin. As an added reminder of the moral virtue of sobriety, many of the fountains displayed inscriptions such as "Jesus said whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him shall never thirst."

Our teaching from Jesus today wraps up chapter ten of Matthew, which is wholly devoted to Jesus' parting instructions to his disciples just before they go on a walkabout: preaching the word, healing the sick, casting out demons and generally trying to convince everyone they meet, that both the love and the judgment of God are a lot closer than they think.

If you've ever left home on a major undertaking — going off to college, enlisting in the military, or moving halfway across the country to take up a new job,— it may be that whoever you left behind had a few parting instructions to offer. If you had a mother on the scene, very likely she was the one to dispense this advice. You know how it goes: "Never mix whites and colors in the washing machine." "Don't give in to peer pressure." "Always wear clean underwear, in case you end up in the emergency room."

Jesus' advice to his disciples is of a different order. They are, after all, on a mission, bringing the good news of the gospel to a hurting world. But his word to them is a form of parting advice, all the same. He tells them: "Preach and teach and heal with boldness." "If the people in one village want nothing to do with you, don't waste your time there, move on to the next." "Travel light." "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." "Don't worry about what you're going to say; trust God to give you the right words, in the nick of time — it will happen." "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

With these and similar words of wisdom, Jesus equips his disciples for their bold, risky and momentous journey. They're going to be "hype-men" (and women) preparing people for the coming reign of God. And having shared the last item in his long list of parting instructions, we can imagine Jesus turning to go away. But then he stops, adding one more thing. That "one more thing" is today's Scripture verse about offering a cup of cold water to "little ones."

Well, who are "these little ones," anyway? They happen to be the disciples the Lord is sending out. It's out of concern for their welfare that he turns, now, to the larger crowd that had gathered and addresses them, as though they were surrogates for the whole population of Judea. Jesus has just been warning the disciples what a tough world it is out there, and how they're going to be spurned and rejected in some of villages, but in others they'll receive wonderful, spirit-

lifting hospitality. They'll never know what's in store for them. They've just got to go there and find out, trusting God every step of the way.

But then Jesus gives the larger population fair warning. He expects something of them as well: If you welcome me, you welcome God who sent me. If you welcome a prophet, you receive the prophet's reward. If you welcome a righteous person, you receive the same reward righteous people receive. Then he offers his encouragement about giving a cup of cool water to "these little ones."

There's a hierarchy here. Were this the army, Jesus would be saying: "Whoever welcomes a general gets a general's pay. Whoever welcomes a colonel gets a colonel's pay. Whoever welcomes a captain gets a captain's pay. And as for these buck privates I'm sending out, if you so much as hand them a cup of coffee and a donut, you, too, are on my list of those who have supported this salvation army. Believe me, I will remember that little kindness when it comes time for the final reckoning!"

There's an idea or principle here of reciprocity. The disciples are going out to share the greatest gift in the world, the good news of salvation. They'll offer that gift for free. Some people they meet will spurn them, throwing the gift back in their faces. Others will accept it, but let it drop as soon as they move on, like handbills littering a city sidewalk. Some will say, "Okay, here's a drink from the old clay water-jar, if you still want it at this time of day."

But then, every once in a while, someone will say: "Here, this is for you: a cup of cold water. I fetched it from the well myself!" Wow, such a contrast to the many gifts, in this world, which are often given according to the ordinary calculation of human values. They're merely a positive re-statement of the ancient criminal code, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." You take care of me, I'll take care of you. You scratch my back, I scratch yours. You do something that's

deserving, and you'll get what you deserve. A cup of ordinary water from the household jar: it's all anyone's really entitled to.

And speaking of Entitlement. That's a touchy subject. It's often been said that we live in an entitlement society. In fact, many might argue that at times it seems like the younger generation expects things to be handed to them. For whatever reason they haven't quite figured out that if you want something these days you have to work for it. Not only that, but our sense of entitlement extends even to our charitable actions. Isn't it true that much of the help we're inclined to offer the needy assumes that these poor unfortunates are not entitled to the help?

"Okay, Mr. Panhandler, if you're really thirsty, I've got this half-empty bottle of water here. I've been drinking from it all day. Don't worry, though. It's still good. It's just a little warm because it's been sitting in my car in the hot sun. Have a nice day!" I guess cups of cold water may not be as common today as we may think. In fact, they just may be as rare today as they were in Jesus' day!

So what can we take away from all this as we end our time of worship together? Today our Lord is teaching us that living a faithful and complete life is all about those trips down to the well to fetch a cup of cold water — not for ourselves, but to give to somebody else. We are all alike in our thirst. We are all alike in our need. And the only person who can quench that thirst is the one who offers not just ordinary water, but Living Water, forevermore. Doing the same thing for others is, well, really cool! And didn't Jesus tell us to love others as he has loved us, to go out and share the gospel message of God's grace and forgiveness with the world? What better way to do that than through the things that say, and more importantly by the things that we do. Amen.