

A CUP OF COOL WATER

James 5:13-20
Mark 9: 38-50

Faith Community
October 1, 2006

Introduction

Do you sometimes wonder if what you do matters? Have you stopped to ask yourself if the little actions of your life make any difference? I mean, does it matter if you cut some ethical corners on you tax return (especially if you are unlikely to get caught)? Does it make any difference if you use someone at work to get ahead? If you cheat a little bit, who really cares?

And, on the other side, does anybody care if you volunteer at school? Does it matter at all that you serve on the Membership Committee? What do the hours at the soup kitchen really count for in the end?

Part of the answer is found in these important words about a cup of water. “Whoever gives you a cup of water...will not lose the reward.”

I

The thing that strikes me in Jesus’ words about giving a cup of water is how important we are. You and I are valued and cared for. Even if someone only offers us a drink of water, they are remembered for that. We matter that much. Even this minor act of kindness is rewarded.

Apparently, every act of generosity is noted. Even giving a cup of cool water to someone in need is important. Each act of hospitality is noted. We are remembered when we act responsibly.

II

We live in an era when we try to avoid personal responsibility. A woman orders a cup of coffee and chooses to drink it in her car. When she spills the coffee on herself, she sues the fast food chain that sold her the coffee.

Some people are now bringing law suits against fast food restaurants for making them fat. Did the restaurant force them to order high fat foods? Did they force-feed them french fries against their will? Did somebody make them go to that restaurant to get their meal? Where are the individuals who take responsibility for themselves?

I heard a woman who was forty-four thousand dollars in debt talking about her situation. But, she said, it wasn’t completely her fault that she was so far in debt. “Oh, why is that?” the reporter asked. “Well,” she said, “Three things: we bought a new house and it had to be furnished, I have three children, and I am alive.”

“You don’t have responsibility for those things?” said the reporter. “Well, the credit companies offer you so much credit that they intentionally get you into huge debt. The problem is that credit is so easy to get.”

In each of those instances there is a real problem. But there is also a need for personal responsibility.

Have you known some people who are never at fault? No matter what the situation, somebody else was responsible for what happened to them. They are the people you never hear say, "I'm sorry, I was wrong." It may be that as our culture turns more inward – as we become more self-oriented – this failure to take responsibility will increase.

III

Jesus is saying here that it does matter what you do. How we act, what we say, what we believe makes a difference. We are responsible for what we do in our lives.

That is true in a very positive sense. Even offering a cup of cool water makes a difference to God. The tiniest act of kindness is noticed. The small acts of generosity matter.

The reassuring words of Jesus here are that we don't have to do the dramatic, heroic act; even a few words of kindness count. We don't have to sacrifice enormously for it to be pleasing to God. We don't have to take some life-changing action to be doing God's will.

The small acts of generosity have meaning. The little deeds of hospitality are important. It may be that a life full of small acts of giving adds up to more than one huge heroic act.

Conclusion

A young man was in college. He and his girlfriend had dated for several years. They were very pleased when she was invited to be a brides-maid in a friend's wedding. But, being young, they didn't have a lot of money. He agreed to buy her dress. Fortunately, the bride chose a dress from Penney's and it only cost \$120, (Although \$120 was a lot more money then). She got the dress, and everything went well.

When the bill came he discovered that instead of billing him \$120, Penney's had given him a credit of \$120. He went to the store and spoke with someone in Customer Service. He tried to explain that he had gotten a credit instead of being billed for the dress. The saleswoman didn't understand. He explained it all again, as more people got in line behind him, waiting their turn.

Finally the saleswoman said, "OK, I'll bill you \$120." He said, "Well, no, if you bill me \$120 then I will have gotten the dress for free – because you have credited my account \$120. You need to bill me for \$240." She said, "O no, I'm not going to charge you twice as much as the dress cost!"

As he was trying to explain again, the woman behind him tapped him on the shoulder, leaned forward and said, "Son, you've tried your best. Just accept it and move on." As he looked at the long line that had built up behind him he took his receipt and went home.

That's a true story of a member of this church. That act had an effect on the people in line who realized that a young person was sacrificing his time and money to do the right thing. The saleswoman had to realize, at least, that someone wanted to be honest enough to ask her to charge him for something he bought. But most importantly, the young man knew that even this relatively small action made a difference to his Creator.

Amen