

“No Small Gestures”

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Even though she was only ten years old, Jessie Parker had already become a creature of habit. Unlike the bedrooms of many young children, her room was always neat, with every item arranged in a meticulous fashion; her bed was made every morning before she went downstairs for breakfast. She always wore red socks and had favourite outfits that she would wear on specific days (Monday outfits on Mondays, Tuesday outfits on Tuesdays, etc.). She ate the same breakfast every morning – Corn Flakes with sliced bananas and a glass of orange juice. She sat with her friends at the same table in the lunchroom and always chose a tuna salad sandwich for lunch. While some might have seen these behaviors as early signs of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, for Jessie and her family they were merely traits that made her the unique and delightful child that everyone adored.

Another habit that Jessie had adopted was to stop every morning on her walk to school at Mrs. Kinney’s house to bring her newspaper to her front porch. Mrs. Kinney had been a Grade One teacher at Jessie’s school for years and had taught Jessie’s parents along with several members of the Parker family; but by the time Jessie began school Mrs. Kinney had retired. While the Parker family wasn’t very close to her, they would always stop and chat with her when she was in her front yard tending to her flowers; but lately they noticed that Mrs. Kinney wasn’t outside as much as usual. Her next-door neighbour reported that Mrs. Kinney had fallen over the winter and broken her hip, and that she now needed a walker to get around the house. Her husband had died years ago, and her only son was in the military and was stationed overseas, so there was no close family to assist her. She had many aides and visiting nurses but was mostly confined to her home even on the sunniest days that would have found her tending to her beloved roses.

One day at supper, the Parkers were discussing what they might be able to do to help their neighbour now that she was limited in her ability to get out into her yard. Jessie listened to the conversation quietly, eating her peas that she always combined with her mashed potatoes. But her mind was racing, thinking about what she might be able to do to help this nice woman who always waved to her when she walked by her house. She was still thinking about this when she walked to school the next morning and noticed the newspaper at the end of Mrs. Kinney’s driveway, thrown there by the newspaper delivery person who threw it out of his window. Knowing that it would be difficult for Mrs. Kinney to retrieve the paper from such a distance, Jessie picked it up and walked up to her front door, depositing the paper into the mail slot. She continued to do this every morning until it became a new part of her morning routine, something that she would do automatically on her way to school.

One morning, as Jessie was bringing the paper to the door, she noticed a brightly coloured envelope taped to Mrs. Kinney’s door with her name written on it. She took it, put it in her backpack, and went on her way to school. It wasn’t until that evening that she retrieved the envelope and opened it. Inside was a lovely card in which Mrs. Kinney wrote a note in her meticulous handwriting (she had taught cursive for many years). In her message, Mrs. Kinney thanked Jessie for her great kindness, and then wrote words that Jessie would always remember: “Your small gesture changed my life. I was feeling alone and hopeless, being unable to care for myself and even get down to the end of the driveway. I always enjoy the morning newspaper with my coffee, and not having it was another loss that was hard for me to handle. When I saw

the paper inside my front door, it told me that someone cares for me, and it made me feel less alone. Your small gesture changed my life."

Indeed, a small gesture can change a person's life.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel lesson are the conclusion of his commissioning of the disciples to carry his message of the coming of the kingdom of God to all nations. Some of those disciples would go on to accomplish great deeds and perform heroic acts, and their names are immortalized in the history of the Church. But many more of those who were commissioned by our Lord were far less heroic, people whose names have been lost in time but whose deeds contributed to the proclamation of the Gospel and blessed many persons with God's steadfast love. For those who are sent forth to "*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16) it is a reminder that there are no small gestures if they are done in the name of the Lord and for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

The conclusion of Jesus' commissioning speech returns to the opening affirmations that authorize and empower the disciples as representatives of Christ ("*Then Jesus summoned the twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*" – 10:1). They are commissioned as *apostles*, persons who are "sent forth" with Christ's authority to continue his ministry; therefore, "*whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*" (10:40). As bearers of the Word, they are to be recognized and welcomed as Christ was welcomed by those who recognized that he was the "*Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14). Such welcoming includes "prophets," who were a distinct class in Matthew's church and who served as spokespersons for the risen Lord ("*Therefore I will send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.*" – 23:34); but those who are to be welcomed as ambassadors of Christ also include the "little ones," the ordinary people who are also called to play an extraordinary role in the proclamation of the Gospel ("*Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see that face of my Father in heaven.*" – 18:10). While disciples such as Peter will inspire thousands to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, even as small a gesture as giving "*a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*" (10:42).

- "The bearers of Jesus' word receive a final word of promise for their work. They are now Christ's fellow-workers and will be like him in all things. Thus, they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if they were Christ himself. When they are welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them. They are bearers of his presence. They bring with them the most precious gift in the world, the gift of Jesus Christ." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The Church that we confess as "*one, holy, catholic and apostolic*" is a Church that has been "sent forth" as never before in these past few months. When we were last invited to "go in peace, serve the Lord" at our last worship gathering in March, we never could have imagined that this sending forth would last so long; even now, we are continuing our time of separation out of an abundance of caution and out of love for our neighbour and our neighbour's health. But while this time of being the church in the midst of a pandemic may be unique, it is in keeping with our Lord's commissioning and sending forth his disciples to share the good news of Jesus Christ with persons both "across the world" and "across the street."

- “Sent by God, Jesus sends his disciples to participate in his mission of proclaiming in word and deed the good news of God’s Kingdom drawing near. Matthew assumes that the church is a ‘sent’ church, a missionary church (Matthew 28:18-20). There is simply no other way to be the church ... The entire baptized are sent into the world to tell and embody the good news of Jesus Christ. All are sent to bear Christ to others with humility and vulnerability, being willing to risk rejection.”
– Elisabeth Johnson.

Since there was no “playbook” to guide us in being the Church during a time of separation and social distancing, many of us have been feeling lost and adrift, with no clear understanding of how we can continue to serve our Lord as his baptized people. While we have some electronic means of communicating and staying connected (including online worship, Zoom meetings, video chat, and even phone calls) they are a poor substitute for in-person worship gatherings in which our door and hearts are open to all. While we can still contribute to groups who are serving persons in need in our community, we still miss being able to come together for quilting, knitting prayer shawls, preparing and serving our Friendship Meals, and being present with one another for comfort and support in times of sickness and grief. We know that while our building is closed the church is still open, we are often anxious and uncertain as to exactly how we can be the church during these most uncertain times.

I have been experiencing this very anxiety and uncertainty in my own life and ministry, since so much of what I have done as a pastor involves being with people both in worship gatherings and in personal visits and conversations. It was during an especially difficult day that the words of one of my favourite hymns came to mind: *“The cup of water given for you still holds the freshness of your grace; yet long these multitudes to view the strong compassion in your face.”* These are the words from the fourth verse of “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” (Hymn 719 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and a reminder of the words of a veteran pastor who told me that we should always sing all verses of every hymn!). The hymn grew out of the Social Gospel movement which focused on the city as a mission field at a time when most missionary hymns talked about “Greenland’s icy mountains” or bringing the Gospel strictly to distant lands. Frank Mason North, an officer in the Methodist Church’s New York City Mission and the National City Evangelical Mission, decided to write about the city outside the walls of his church as he saw it, about “haunts of wretchedness” and “shadowed thresholds dark with fears.” He wrote of Wall Street-like paths that “hide the lures of greed,” and called upon the Lord to *“tread the city’s streets again; till all the world shall learn your love, and follow where your feet have trod; till glorious from you heaven above shall come the city of our God.”* As North’s hymn inspired the church of his generation to look for opportunities to share the love of God with those in their neighbourhoods and communities, it can also inspire us to look for daily opportunities to extend Christ’s love to those we meet in our daily lives. It can be something as simple as a smile to a neighbour across the street, or a card or phone call to someone who is feeling increasing isolated, or shopping for someone who is unable to leave their home. It can be a small and simple a gesture as delivering a meal to a homebound person, or bringing in their mail and newspaper, or sewing facemasks to protect people when they go out in public. It can be faithful acts such as keeping one another in our daily prayers, keeping daily devotions and Bible readings at the centre of our family lives, supporting the ongoing ministry of the Church, and trusting in God to bring us through these challenging times in the comfort of God’s holy and certain hope. It means recognizing that there are daily opportunities for us to serve as disciples of Christ, and that there is no such thing as a small gesture when it is done in the name of the Lord and for the sake of serving the people who our God dearly loves.

- “Discipleship doesn’t have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but tend the relationships that are most important to us, so

also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.” – David Lose.

Jessie’s daily habit of bringing Mrs. Kinney’s newspaper to her front door continued even after her school closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While losing out on a regular part of her life was at first a difficult adjustment for this creature of habit, Jessie soon discovered new routines that became a regular part of her days. She set up a “classroom” in the guest bedroom and spent her school hours there in reading, studying, and participating in online classes. At lunch, she made her own tuna salad sandwiches and had Zoom gatherings with her lunchmates. When school finished for the day, Jessie made lemonade and set up a stand outside of the family home – not to sell the lemonade, but to give it out to anyone who wanted a cool drink on a warm day. Jessie continued to find small ways to make a big difference in the lives of others.

We may not be the disciples who are remembered by name in history. Most of us will not have schools and hospitals named after us; most of our names will be forgotten soon after we have died. But while we may not be saints who are immortalized by future generations of Christians, our faithful discipleship will make a world of difference in every act of lovingkindness we extend to others. Even a cup of cold water given in the name of Christ can have life-changing consequences; for *“there is no small gesture ... and through their cups of cold water, hugs, helping hands, and listening ears [we] are caring for the world God loves so much.”* (Lose).

When we commit ourselves to following Jesus’ commandment to *“love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12), we know that even the smallest gesture can have the greatest consequence when it is done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in love for those who are God’s beloved children.

When we love another in Christ’s name, **there are no small gestures!**

Amen.