

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
June 26, 2011 – 2 Pentecost
Matthew 10:40-42
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

I'd like to begin with an invitation to you to let me know the questions and concerns you have about leading a Christian life. When I prepare a sermon, one of my responsibilities is to talk about the day's scripture lessons, including a consideration of how the lessons are relevant to your lives. The more I know about your concerns, the more relevant my words can be. If you tell me your questions, I can explore what scripture, theology, and the writings of other Christians have to say about them.

This week I have been wrestling with a question about the Christian life, primarily because a friend of mine is having difficulties in her parish church. This is the question: why doesn't it feel better to be good? My friend is a good woman, a gentle, patient, kind, and generous Christian. She is the type of person who should be treated well by other Christians and who should feel at peace within herself. Let me just say that her experience is not like this. So I have been wondering why it doesn't feel better to be good. You may have wondered the same thing, from your own experiences. I think this morning's gospel is related to this question.

Our reading from the gospel of Matthew is the end of a chapter in which Jesus gives the disciples missionary instructions. He sends the twelve apostles out among the Jewish people to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, to cast out demons, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Jesus instructed the men to travel light and to stay where they were welcome. He said, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Jesus taught the disciples to have courage in the face of their persecutors, trusting that God valued them.

Jesus never disguises the fact that being a witness to God's kingdom and a follower of his is costly. The verses immediately preceding this morning's lesson are some of Jesus' clearest words of warning: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:37-39). Jesus calls us to love God with deep devotion. Our other loves, including our love of self, must be subordinate to our love of God. When we remember this, it becomes far less surprising that it often doesn't feel good to be good!

Now let's look at the last part of this morning's lesson. Jesus is instructing the disciples about rewards. In a different translation, The Common English Bible, that is a bit clearer, Jesus says: "everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded." This is the easiest task Jesus identifies: to give the necessities of life to other Christians in need. This is a basic component of the Christian life, something we never "graduate" from. Each one of us is called to help others in need, especially other Christians. Jesus promises that such good deeds will be rewarded by God.

This week I received an email article about the Diocese of Maine and its connections with the Diocese of Haiti. A number of parishes in this diocese have ties with specific parishes in Haiti. People from Maine recently traveled to Haiti and visited the parishes they have supported financially. Two parishes here raised money to build the addition of a school onto St. Barnabas' Church, located in a remote village. In the article there was a photograph of a Haitian woman carrying a concrete block on her head

two miles up the mountain to the church. Every concrete block for the building and every bucket of water used to mix concrete for the building had to be carried by the people in this way. The people of Maine couldn't carry the blocks and water up the mountain, but they could raise money to purchase the materials to build the school for their fellow Christians.

Soon you will hear more at St. Giles' about a national Episcopal Church campaign to raise funds to rebuild the Cathedral in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, brick by brick. Our Presiding Bishop is asking the Bishops of every diocese to ask each parish to support this campaign. \$10 buys a brick, and if every Episcopalian in the country donates two bricks, the national church can contribute its goal of \$10,000,000 to this project. You and I cannot sort through the rubble of the old cathedral or lay the bricks of the new cathedral, but we can give funds to build our fellow Christians a center for worship and education and outreach, to help them rebuild what was destroyed, to raise up what was cast down.

In places far away the most we can do for our fellow Christians is often providing financial support. Close to home, the "cup of cold water" can be more direct and personal. We can give each other support in many ways, with offerings of many kinds, given for the love of Christ to those who love Christ.

I'm sure that many of us have given to others in need and been immediately "rewarded" by the other person's gratitude or by the good feeling we have when we help someone in need of help. Sometimes it does indeed feel good to be good.

But I imagine that many of us have also had less happy experiences as we have tried to do what we feel Jesus is calling us to do. That's when our commitment to the Christian life is tested. Our efforts may be taken for granted, mocked, or scorned. We

may be misunderstood as being simply foolish or having a “holier than thou” attitude. There are people in the church as well as outside of the church who are willing to exploit the kindness of others. At the worst, we may feel that the “cup of cold water” we gave has been boiled and thrown back in our faces!

I don't think Jesus would be surprised to hear our unhappy stories. He sent the first apostles out to do nothing but good, and yet he warned them that they would be beaten and hated. As each of us sorts out how we are called to give to others in the name of Christ, we need to remember that it is sometimes right for us to stop trying and move on when we are rejected. Jesus told the apostles, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town” (Matthew 10:14). It may be right for us to walk away from a relationship or a job or a church and offer our gifts elsewhere.

Jesus calls us take up the cross and follow him. But we must discern what cross we are meant to take up and how. We must pray and think and struggle with our love of self. That's not a comfortable process. We must quiet our noise and be ready to hear God's voice, ready to hear from God about God's will. This is not always easy.

The Christian life is demanding and challenging. The gratification is quite often delayed. There are times when it is a struggle to keep going on the path of following Jesus. Then we need to hold in our hearts St. Paul's words of encouragement to the Christians in Rome: “The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen.