

HOSPITALITY

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Matthew 10:40-42

There is a church in Madison, Tennessee, on the north side of Nashville. The church is called Cornerstone. You may have heard of it. It is a huge church and is known, for among other things, for throwing elaborate events. Around the 4th of July, for example, they will place hundreds of American flags in the front of the church. They will have a service featuring patriotic music. This service will include a fireworks show. Inside. Fireworks inside their auditorium.

Last week, I was driving by that church and noticed that they had their VBS banner out by the street. It looked just like every other VBS banner in the world, including our own—a rectangle of colorful vinyl hung with bungee cords between two fence posts. (That is how the book of Leviticus instructs us to hang VBS banners.) This particular banner gave all the usual information for a VBS—the theme, the dates, the time. But, this banner had one word that ours did not have. It had one word that I had not seen before on any VBS banner. That one word was “free.” F-R-E-E. In large block letters, it said FREE VBS. Free, as in no cost.

At first, that struck me as odd. Of course VBS is free. Ours is. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized how brilliant that was. Not only was it brilliant marketing, but it was also (I hated to admit) brilliant discipleship.

Churches have a bad habit of making assumptions. We assume that people understand what we do and are familiar with how we operate. When we make these assumptions, we are being not only arrogant, we are being lazy as well. We assume that the world is like us. But it is not. How many people drive by our church thinking, “I wonder how much it costs to go there?” To us, that is a preposterous question. We don’t charge you to get in. We wait until you’ve been sitting here for a while. To some people, to those who have no experience with church, especially those who are used to being excluded, it is a legitimate question.

I certainly don’t understand everything about other religions. This year, for example, I could not figure out when Passover started. The calendar said Monday, but it was not clear if that meant Sunday at sundown or Monday at sundown. For Jews, the day begins at sundown. So, I called a Jewish friend. He is very observant. I asked this question. He said to me, “Hold on, I’ll have to ask my wife.” It was Monday.

Now, back to this Free VBS. As a pastor, I do have a certain perverse fantasy that we're sold out every Sunday, standing room only. Bouncers at the doors. You have to have a ticket to get in. No ticket, no forgiveness. We no longer have members, we have season ticket holders. If you want to sit in a particular pew each

week, then you will need to buy a PSL. We've got upper level, lower level, covered seating, loge, skybox, orchestra. In the back, in the middle, that little aisle—50 yard line. What about the early service in the chapel, what is that? VIP Meet-And-Greet, of course.

VBS would be no different. Ticketmaster would sell out in less than a minute. Parents would go around begging for tickets saying, "I promised my little Timmy that he would go to Presbyterian VBS and it's sold out. What do I do? I can trade you four tickets to Hamilton."

By putting Free on the VBS banner, that church is offering an invitation to a group of people who otherwise would not know that VBS was free and probably would just pass it by. By doing this they may have brought the gospel to someone who might otherwise have missed it.

Our reading today is from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew—a chapter that scholars refer to as the Missionary Discourse. The entire chapter consists of Jesus' instructions to his twelve disciples on how to do missions. *The harvest is plentiful*, he tells him, *but the laborers are few* (9:37). Jesus doesn't send the twelve out empty-handed. He gives them authority to cast out unclean spirits, to cure every disease and every sickness. He warns them that they will face opposition and persecution.

This gospel, like the Gospel of Luke, is written to a particular group of people—Matthew's congregation. These people are two or three generations beyond the resurrection. These mission instructions are not just Jesus' words to the twelve, but Matthew intends them as instruction to his own people as well. Matthew is telling his people that part of being a follower of Christ—a Christian—is sharing the gospel with the world.

So, here at the end of chapter 10, Jesus tells the twelve, *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me*. In other words, when a disciple is out in the world, sharing the gospel they are Jesus' envoy. When they are welcomed by someone, then that person is also welcoming Jesus, and, in turn, God. When someone welcomes the disciple, they are welcoming God. As Jesus is telling the disciples and as Matthew is telling his people, you are God's representative.

Then Jesus offers us three classifications of believers—prophets, the righteous, and the little ones. The prophets are clearly the most important. Prophets speak the words of God. Elijah was a prophet, Elisha was a prophet, Ezekiel was a prophet, Amos was a prophet, and so on. There were also traveling prophets whose names we do not know. All these prophets were viewed as people of God.

Next in line are the righteous. If the prophets have super-powers, then the righteous are just regular people who lead special lives. These are people of faith. They follow God's laws and commandments. They lead exemplary lives. People look up to them. They are righteous.

Third are the "little ones." Little ones could mean children, but the term probably means those people who are immature in their faith, who have yet to grow strong in their beliefs. Maybe little ones do not know of Jesus at all. Clearly, they are at the bottom of this ladder.

Jesus tells his disciples that if someone were to meet a prophet and they welcome that prophet in a manner that reflects the prophet's status—a banquet feast with the local VIPs who present the key to the city—that would be appropriate. That person would receive a heavenly reward.

Likewise, if someone were to meet a righteous person and show them hospitality befitting a righteous person—maybe inviting them and some friends for a nice meal—that would be appropriate. That person would receive their heavenly reward.

But what if you, a disciple, encounter a 'little one' and even if all you do is offer them a cup of cold water, is that enough, is there any reward in that? Yes. While the prophet may get a champagne toast and the little one a cup of cold water, that is sufficient.

Do you remember the parable about the laborers—those laborers who worked all day and received a full day's wage. Then there were the laborers who worked only one hour but also received a full day's wage. The first group complained. But they were not cheated. There were given what they were promised. Jesus tells that parable to teach that God is gracious and extravagant in ways that we cannot always understand.

In the world, even the smallest gesture, when acted in love, has meaning.

The scriptures are clear that as Christians, we are called upon to offer love, to exercise hospitality. Matthew gives us Jesus' words on this expectation: *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

God does not always demand great acts of sacrifice from us. God asks that we respond to the moment. When confronted with a prophet, we should respond accordingly. But even a cup of cold water is often enough—a hug, a thank you, a visit, a kind word, a note, a call.

That is where discipleship begins. No gesture is too small, no person too insignificant.

We can see this in that VBS banner which includes the word FREE. It is a small word. Most people will overlook it. But for some, it speaks loudly. It says, Come inside. We've got water.