

Psalm 89:1 - Your love, O LORD, for ever will I sing; *

from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.

Please have a seat

Sometimes the lectionary gives us a clear direction and sometimes it is like today. Sometimes Scripture is like aloe on a sunburn and sometimes it demands that we wrestle with it. Sometimes you get a familiar face and voice and sometimes you have a stranger. So let's change that. My name is Will and I am very honored to be worshipping with you. Thank you for welcoming me! It has been a minute since I have been in the hustle and bustle of NoVa, but only a minute.

Our readings would benefit from a little context, but we'll focus on the Gospel for right now. Jesus here is finishing his speech to his disciples that you have heard large parts of over the past few weeks. In preparing to send them out, he has given them authority over spirits, told them not to take anything with them and that they will be rejected and persecuted in places worse than

what they have already seen done to him. Matthew might also have had his own flock in mind while writing this as well. Both itinerant preachers and efforts at persecuting Christians moved throughout the Roman empire, hosting another disciple could be risky.

However, hospitality is an important virtue throughout Scripture. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed because of their inhospitality, Rahab is saved from Jericho's destruction because of her hospitality, The widow at Nain makes bread for Elijah with the last of her ingredients and God makes her flour and oil to last until the end of the drought, Martha busies herself with making a meal for Jesus and the disciples, the examples go one and on.

Jesus says that when one of his followers is welcomed, he is too, which elevates hospitality to the status of a divine act. How about that for a cup of coffee! It does open the question though: What does it mean to welcome Jesus? To invite him in and offer him a little pan con cafe? For us deacons, we seek to find Christ in

each person we serve regardless of whether that is with a chalice or in a soup kitchen line. I have seen more of Christ in homeless shelters and orphanages than I have found in most other places. It is most often the small things that make the warmest welcome. Eyes that light up above a genuine smile in greeting someone, a listening ear for the trials of the day. I have seen hard men release the tension in their body from receiving a simple, "Hey, how have you been? Are you hungry? We have dinner ready." These small connections brought people back to the shelter night after night until they were ready to share their story and ready to trust the relationships that had been built would support them on their journey toward stability and health. Similarly, we return to the table week after week seeking the love that comes to us through the bread and the wine and the community that comes to kneel next to us and invite us to let our burdens down and connect to each other and to our God.

Again, it is small things that say, “you belong here.” A name asked for and remembered, activity bags that support our children engaging in worship as the full members in body incarnate of Christ that they are, sharing a hymnal or helping someone who came late catch up on where we are in the service. These little things are acts of love and care for each other and especially for strangers. They offer an invitation to join the community and become part of the body of Christ. To be in relationship with the people of God is to be in relationship with God.

Creating a relationship is what welcoming guests is all about. The seemingly small act of giving a cup of water or making a cup of coffee con un pedasito de pan has an outsized impact. It is generous in love. It makes a bid for connection or perhaps it is a response to one. Our God wants to be in a close relationship with us and reaches out in many ways, one way may be the unexpected visitor. In this case hospitality is the response to God

looking to connect. Connection with other people and more so with God requires us to be vulnerable and let ourselves be seen and known. Even the parts of us that are in pain, the parts that hurt those closest to us, the parts that we think are unacceptable, unlovable; the parts that we wish didn't exist. Welcoming Jesus in means that we are opening up these parts to him, because he already knows you completely and has decided to love you for your flaws, and that we are attempting to show our love for God by following the teachings of Jesus whom God sent and who has sent his own disciples on.

With risk comes reward. What about this business of a reward then? A prophet's reward is, usually, persecution and death. Not exactly an incentive to be a host for one. However, if welcoming a prophet gets a prophet's reward, what about receiving the messiah? Would we get a messiah's reward? That might make me think twice, especially after considering what often happens to prophets. What exactly would that be? Jesus too,

we heard last week, tells his disciples that families will turn on each other because of him. He goes so far as to say that he has come to cause war, not bring peace. Counterintuitively, this reckoning, rather than salvation, is what opens the door for a real relationship by seeking to work through the issues in the relationship to arrive at a place of deep knowledge and trust. This is what God is after with God's wayward people, with you and me. There will be salvation, of course, but it can't come at the expense of the relationship.

It seems to me that the reward for the messiah is not only death on a cross, but transformation. Jesus is first changed at his baptism, then transfigured on the mountaintop and finally he is transformed again when he is "brought from death to life", to borrow Paul's words, after his crucifixion. First death, then life. Through death we come face-to-face with God and in resurrection we find ourselves changed, bound but freed. Liberated from the sin that exists inside us from the time of creation, but bound ever

tighter to our God, the creator of all that is seen and unseen, our heavenly father and almighty Lord. Walking with God was never for the faint of heart. The reward of eternal life comes only through death. Death to sin, to our old selves and ways of doing things. Welcoming Jesus into our lives and our hearts is to joyfully submit to be obedient to the Word of God. The psalmist puts it plainly, “For I am persuaded that your love is established for ever; * you have set your faithfulness firmly in the heavens. “

It is this faithfulness and love that we rely on to strengthen ourselves to face the vulnerability and risk inherent in welcoming a stranger, a prophet, the messiah himself. It is to this love of God that we cling to for guidance, for freedom, for light in the darkness, and life in the midst of death. A transformational force that brings us into a deeper relationship with God and all it costs us is a cup of cold water.