

Proper 8 A 2020

Matthew 10:40-42

In these times  
When it seems the foundations of the world might crumble,  
A story from another time and place.  
Another time when the earth was shaken  
And seemed ready to fall apart.

When the horrific earthquake was over,  
And the tremors subsided,  
My friend Tana knew there was only one most important thing  
She had to do,  
No matter what.

Find her children,  
On the other side of the capital city.

We should have known it was coming,  
She said to me many years later.  
We should have known it was coming,  
Because three days before,  
All the birds left.  
It was the time of year  
For swallows over the lake,  
And one day, they were all gone.  
Some old people told us that meant something was coming,  
Earthquake or volcano.  
But we went on with our lives.  
We should have known.  
I should have taken my children away to the country.

But now the disaster had happened,  
And there was only one most important thing for her to do.  
Her husband was working in another town,  
And she did not know if he was safe,  
But there was nothing she could do for him.  
Her children were with her mother  
On the other side of the city.  
She set out with her father, on foot,  
To find them.

They walked for hours,  
She told me,  
And it was so hot.

The ground was torn open,  
Trees were fallen,  
Houses collapsed.  
Streets and sidewalks were upended,  
Dust and trash were everywhere.

She began to wilt in the heat.  
She was longing for a drink of water.  
By that point,  
They were in the central city,  
In a neighborhood full of grand houses,  
Half-hidden behind walls and gates.  
Some houses were clearly empty,  
But in some, there were signs of life.

Some of the walls were broken down,  
And gates were hanging open.  
Finally, in desperation,  
She walked through one broken gate,  
Up a long drive,  
To a heavy wooden door,  
And she knocked.  
Someone answered,  
But when she asked for water,  
The door slammed shut.  
This happened a second time,  
A few minutes later.  
She did not try a third time.

But then  
They came to another house  
Where the gate was swung open  
On twisted hinges,  
And inside,  
They could see a swimming pool.  
The earthquake had shaken much of the water out,  
But halfway down,  
Full of trash and leaves,  
There was water.

I walked down the steps of the pool, she said,  
And lay down in the water.  
I put my face into the water and drank.  
And the water from that swimming pool  
Is still the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.

After they had drunk from the swimming pool,  
Tana and her father walked on.  
They did not get lost.  
They found their way to the house,  
And everyone was safe. \*

It had only been a few years since the earthquake  
When Tana told me that story,  
But it seemed like forever at the time.  
After the earthquake  
Came a revolution,  
And a war,  
A bewildering mixture of hope and anguish,  
Of deprivation and empowerment.  
They were turbulent times.

But the memory of the water from the swimming pool  
Remained fresh.

Always before, when I have remembered that story,  
I have seen it through Tana's eyes.  
It is her story.

But now, in our own turbulent times,  
Our own bewildering mix of hope and anguish,  
Now, somewhat against my will,  
I am wondering about the people in the grand houses,  
The ones who turned her away.  
I never asked her  
If it was a servant who opened the door,  
The first time or the second time,  
Or whether it was the master or mistress of the house –  
Or a child.  
I didn't wonder then,  
Or ever since, until now.

But now, I do wonder.  
Who was it, who refused to offer a cup of cold water  
To an exhausted woman and her weary father,  
As they made their way through a ruined city,  
Under a tropic sun?

What happens to us,  
That we turn away from this simplest of acts,  
That we fail to offer a cup of cold water  
To a fellow human being,

Made, like us,  
Of water and dust and the breath of life?

A cup of cold water.  
A simple, humble act –  
The most basic gesture of human kindness.  
A simple, humble act,  
That can convey compassion, connection,  
Communion.

In turbulent times,  
This action offers clarity.  
In helpless times,  
This is something we can do.

In another turbulent time,  
Jesus saw the crowds who followed him,  
And he had pity on them,  
Because they were harassed and helpless,  
Like sheep without a shepherd.

They asked him,  
Over and over,  
What they should do.  
Sometimes, when they asked what they should do,  
He didn't answer, but told them stories,  
And sometimes they understood.  
Sometimes, when they asked him,  
What then should we do,  
He told them what to do.  
And once in a while,  
They did it.  
Once in a while.

We are no different.

But in this time,  
Leaderless,  
Divided,  
Afraid, lonely,  
Filled with shame and sadness,  
Could we hear the words of Jesus  
And consider acting on them?

What does he say?  
Welcome.

Welcome the prophet.  
Welcome the righteous.  
Welcome the little ones with a cup of cold water.

Welcome.  
Welcome in a time when we are apart,  
When doors that were opening are slamming shut.  
Welcome.

As we consider our lives together,  
In this community of faith,  
As we consider how to move into a new season,  
We have been wondering what to do,  
How to do it.  
Our best and most fruitful answers  
Will be grounded in our identity and values,  
And will keep us focused on our mission.  
As we do that work together,  
We have been asking,  
What do we value  
About our life together in community?

And one thing that has come up,  
Over and over,  
Is welcoming.

We consider ourselves to be a community of welcome.  
We value the experience of welcoming,  
Whether formally as greeters,  
Or in our informal interactions.

And so I wonder –  
Can we move beyond the welcoming we have known,  
And embrace the radical welcome of Jesus?

Welcome the prophet.  
Welcome the righteous person.  
Offer the cup of cold water.

Prophets can make us uncomfortable.  
They speak for God;  
They hold up a truthful mirror  
And ask us to see our choices and actions,  
Revealed in the light of God.  
Who are the prophets now,  
And what truth do they speak?

The righteous can make us uncomfortable.  
They hear the prophets, and  
Their choices and actions are aligned with the will of God.  
Who are the righteous now,  
And what do they do?

And the little ones of God?  
They can make us uncomfortable  
When they ask for a cup of cold water.

Why is that?  
Why do we slam our doors,  
The doors of our houses, the doors of our hearts,  
When God's little ones  
Come asking for water?

If this is a moment for you to wonder,  
To wonder about the times you may have slammed a door,  
Or stood by while a door is slammed,  
If this is a moment for you to wonder,  
Then offer yourself to the holy work  
Of looking within,  
Looking beyond,  
Seeking the truth  
That can be painful,  
And will be liberating.

If this is a moment for you to wonder,  
Then take this question within,  
And look beyond.

Who is asking for a cup of cold water now?  
And what does the cup of water look like?

Sometimes, as it was for my friend Tana,  
A cup of water really is a cup of water.  
Sometimes it is some other simple, humble act  
That is well within our power,  
if only we have the will, the courage,  
the vision to see it,  
And then do it.

If only we can see.  
If only we can learn to welcome

The stranger at the door.  
The prophet who speaks truth  
We are reluctant to hear.  
The righteous person  
Who shows us how to act.

If only we can see,  
Have courage to speak,  
Have courage to act.

Are we ready to be welcoming,  
In this new time?

Can we welcome our won selves,  
Do the work of inner reconciliation?

Can we welcome the friend?  
Trust another to listen to our fears, our hopes,  
Our dreams?

Can we welcome the stranger?

When we welcome,  
We enter into the dream of God.  
When we welcome,  
We find ourselves welcomed.

It can begin, very simply,  
With a cup of water.

\*Dona Cayetana Blanco de Diaz told me this story about the 1972 Managua earthquake as we sat on the patio of her home in Leon, Nicaragua, in the spring of 1987.