

## **“A Cup Of Cold Water”**

**Matthew 10 : 40-42**

Anyone here ever work as a waiter or waitress in a restaurant?

If you have ever worked at waiting on tables, then you know from experience there are two distinct parts of your income: the hourly wage and your tips. In fact, generous tips are about all that makes it possible to live on many service-industry jobs.

Some of the more ritzy establishments automatically add on a gratuity to the tab. But for the vast majority of service jobs, giving a tip is the unique moment in time when the served can make a personal statement about the service. For the wonderful waiter who made sure everything was just the way you ordered it, and knew when to appear and when to disappear, you can add some well-earned dollars onto the bill. Likewise for the waiter who took forever to show up, served things late and cold, and ignored your frantic flailing for more coffee, you can return the insult with a puny pittance of gratitude.

But a tip says as much about the customer who leaves it as it does about the person who receives it.

It's disturbing to learn, then, that at any average restaurant what the wait staff typically dreads is being on duty Sunday after church time. In the waiting-tables world, it is a well-worn word of warning that the after church crowd are the worst tippers of the week.

Dr. Barbara Ehrenreich once went "undercover" as a waitress in order to do research for her book: *Nickel And Dimed*. The object of her project was to give public exposure to what life is like for people in our society who work at low-wage jobs.

In her book she tells about the "visible Christians" as being the worst she has encountered as a waitress. She recalls the large after-worship crowd all seated around one table as running her "mercilessly" with endless demands and complaints, and then leaving her a one dollar tip on a \$90 bill.

That's why, for the poor wait staff, Sunday's after church have become known as a time of chump change and curmudgeonly customers. What a reputation

for Christians to have earned! Where in the New Testament can we read of Jesus directing His followers to be cheapskates, and to belittle others?

Today's gospel text is Jesus' final directive to his disciples as they set out with the mission and message their Master has given to them. They have been charged with great power: to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons (10:8). They have been given one all-encompassing, joyful message - the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near (verse 7).

And while Jesus spends much time cautioning his disciples about the hardships and hard-heartedness they will encounter because of their mission and message, even warning them about the cost of their discipleship, he saves the tantalizing promise of reward for his final words to them.

For those who welcome Jesus' disciples, who welcome and care for the prophet and the righteous person, they themselves will receive a prophet's reward or the reward of the righteous.

But Jesus most notably calls attention to the little ones, to the everyday, ordinary, undistinguished disciple. To the one who is thoughtful enough even just in something as small as offering a cup of cold water, they too will reap the reward of the prophet and the righteous. A small, simple act of everyday compassion brings with it the wealth of the joy of the kingdom of heaven come near.

Many of us hear about the themes of the various commencement speeches delivered at American colleges and universities. In 2005, a commencement speech was delivered by the famous actor, Tom Hanks.

Tom Hanks' daughter was graduating from Vassar College, so he agreed to deliver their commencement address. He focused his remarks around a surprising finding made by some researchers studying computer-generated simulations of gridlock. The study was trying to "determine how many cars should be taken off the road to turn a completely jammed and stilled highway into a free-flowing one."

The results were startling. Only four cars needed to be removed . . . four cars out of each one hundred. Hanks went on to call this phenomenon "The Power of Four." He asked his listeners to imagine other changes that just four could make.

Take a hundred musicians in a depressed port city in Northern England, choose John, Paul, George and Ringo and you have "Hey Jude." Take a hundred computer geeks in Redmond, Washington. Send 96 of them home and the remainder is called Microsoft. "Take the Power of Four," Hanks challenged in his conclusion, "and apply it to any and every area of your concern."

What would happen if this Sunday after church just four in a hundred Christians eating out decided to be big tippers? What if just four Christian restaurant diners determined they would extend God's unimaginably great gifts and graces in the tiny, seemingly insignificant act of adding a ridiculously out-sized tip to their bill.

Any act of kindness that we do towards someone else is the "cup of cold water" that Jesus talks about.

Tips can become tipping points. Because little things are big with God.

Because little is much if God is in it. God catalogs the number of hairs on our heads in the same file as the number of stars in the galaxy, the number of galaxies in the universe.

In the early church the norm was persecution and opposition. So our forebears in the faith developed secret hand-signals and coded messages whereby they could identify other Christians. One of these was the fish. You probably have seen the fish symbol on the back of someone's car.

If you were a Christian in the first or second century, and you were talking to someone else, you might nonchalantly use your toe to draw an arc in the dirt. If the other person drew a second arc in the dirt with their toe, thereby forming the image of a fish, you knew that you had met a brother or sister in Christ.

What would happen if a tradition of Christians as big tippers were to emerge, especially in the morning and early afternoon when the service crew works the hardest but the bill (and hence the tips) are the smallest?

What might happen if the world were to identify Christians by our tradition of large tipping? And what if we were to place the mark of the fish by our tip on our credit card stubs as a sign that we're doing this in Jesus name?

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\* The idea and most illustrative material borrowed from Professor Leonard Sweet.