

Several years ago my aunt gifted me this plaque of a very simply drawn cat. This symbol was part of the coded language used by—I'm not sure what the culturally sensitive term is for *hobo*—but the community of travelers who got around by riding the rails. A cat carved on a tree or a fence post meant “kind-hearted woman” and communicated to the next traveler that they were likely to receive hospitality in that place. The yard of my grandmother’s house, the house in Altoona where my mother grew up, was bordered by train tracks, right about where the trains would slow down on the way into the middle of town—a good place to jump out of a box car to avoid authorities. My grandmother’s house was marked; she was known to feed hungry travelers—not in the kitchen, because boundaries, but on the porch that wrapped around the back of the house. She died when I was in the second grade, so I don’t have nearly the memories of her and that house that I wish I did, but I have no trouble envisioning her offering that hospitality, this everyday saint who was certainly brick and mortar in the foundation on which my faith was built.

If you’ve been hanging in here with us for the last few weeks, congratulations on making it to the end of Jesus’ long pep talk to the disciples as he sends them out on a mission to cure the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Up until this brief conclusion, most of what Jesus has been saying is a challenge and a warning: go without provisions, without extra clothes or money or a suitcase; go like sheep into the midst of wolves and be prepared to get dragged before the authorities; don’t think my message will bring peace but a sword; those who find their life will lose it...finally, Jesus talks about welcome and reward.

Before we get too excited about rewards, remember who it was that Jesus sent the disciples to: this whole mission came about because as Jesus was teaching and healing, he had compassion on the crowds because he saw they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. The disciples should probably adjust their expectations of what they may receive in return for the work that they do among these shepherdless sheep, these harassed and helpless people, these *little ones* as Matthew calls them here, which might have meant children, but only in the sense that in ancient times, children were exceptionally vulnerable and powerless, having

no status to put them on the social ladder. Jesus and his contemporaries lived in a world that was very transactional: they honored others in the hope of getting honor in return—you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, no such thing as free lunch...maybe not that different from our current culture. Yet Jesus sends his disciples to those who are not in a position to pay them back or elevate their status; this is a different way of looking at the world.

In fact, if we read this passage closely, the welcome and reward are not really going to the disciples. It's whoever welcomes the prophet who receives the reward, not the prophet themselves; it's whoever welcomes the righteous person who receives the reward, not the righteous person. It's the one who gives the cup of water to one of the little ones *in the name of a disciple*, not the disciple themselves who is rewarded. Jesus invented the concept of paying it forward 2,000 years before anyone ever got to the window at Starbucks and discovered that the driver in front of them had covered their bill. The disciples aren't going out to heal and drive out demons and proclaim the good news of the kingdom in order to be rewarded themselves... and neither are we. When we pastors joke with each other about doing some part of this job that we'd really rather not do, someone always says "stars in your crown" but we don't really think we're earning heavenly rewards by doing what Jesus expects us to do anyway. That may be the way our world works, but that's not the economy of the kingdom of heaven. God's love isn't transactional, it's abundant. Yet how rewarding to think that even something as small as a cup of cold water might be given to someone who's thirsty in the name of our discipleship—someone shows compassion to another because we showed Christ's compassion to them.

I admit that in my kitchen where my "kindhearted cat" sign hangs, I mostly serve dinner to my own family or friends; I haven't quite taken after my grandmother, though, in my defense, I don't live by the train tracks, and even if I did, I don't know that there are that many folks still riding the rails these days. I guess I have to find other outlets for compassion. But I love to think of how that sign worked—a community passing on the good news of hospitality that they received to others who might be in need. I imagine some of those travelers left my grandmother's back porch and were a little kinder to whomever they met next, if only because we tend to be more civil on a full stomach when we're not hangry. And see how even a small act of kindness could have changed that little corner of the world? May we go and do likewise.