A cup of cold water.

It’s not a big deal. Nothing fancy—paper, metal, ceramic, glass. Beads of sweat running down the sides.

Jesus tells his followers that the one who offers the cup and the one who accepts it are one and the same: Christ himself.

Matthew has him make is more explicit later in his gospel—we’ll actually read that passage in about five months. It’s Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, when the king (AKA Son of Man) decides the fate of those have come before him, putting the righteous on one hand and theunrighteous on the other. We’ve come to know that story as the lasts judgment and call it by that name.

We can be so puritanical in our vision that the only thing we can see is judgment. But that misses the real point of the story, as far as I’m concerned. The real point is found in the context of today’s reading from Matthew: “Whoever wecomes you welcomes me.” The part abou the prophets and the righteous people strikes me as almost a distraction from that straightforward declaration. And, though he doesn’t say it in this passage, Jesus declares the obverse as well. When someone welcomes us, that person is welcoming Christ.

Back to that sheep and goat story: Jesus makes it explicit: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

And there is the whole of the gospel, distilled into a cup of cold water. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. And loving yourself is not some namby-pamby New Age sentiment. It is God’s commandment to all of us, to insure that we value and honor Christ within ourselves as well as within those around us.

In these stressful times it is as difficult as it has ever been to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being. I know: here’s that baptismal covenant business again. But it’s persistent and will not leave us alone, especially when we want to identify with only the peaceful protestors or with only the officers trying to keep the peace. But the fact is that “all persons” and “every human being” include the aggressive protestors and the abusive police as well. As long as we are able to exclude those who disagree with us or anger us we are not fulfilling the promises we made at baptism.

Today’s first hymn shows us—and stays with us as only an Irish melody can—that the Lord is present with us at every moment, from daybreak to lights out, and in every activity, from rolling out of bed to working to sleep. From the Big Bang to the pandemic and the November elections. The Lord is there—here—with us, offering hope, joy, trust, bliss, eagerness, strength, kindness, grace, love, gentleness, contentment, comfort, and peace.

The sequence hymn does the same for space, urging us to mindfulness of God’s presence in all places—crowded streets, protests, hovels of the poor, mountainsides, cities, all the world.

This gospel, these hymns, serve to tell us that God is actively present in every time and place we can imagine and cannot imagine—even in the dark and troubling recesses of our hearts, home to fear, greed, sadness, pain, selfishness.

That second hymn is a prayer that all the world will learn God’s love.

By yesterday our nearly 18-year-old dachshund Woody made it clear to us that it was time for him to go. In my phone calls and our eventual trip to the vet who euthanized him there was clear proof of God’s love. And it doesn’t matter in the least what all those people think or believe about it. God’s love is bigger than our intellectual and theological constructs and ideas.

Jesus tells us over and over that God’s love is with us in all these ties and places, and in what is offered to a stranger. Or received from one.

All this in a cup of cold water.

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