

“We declare that your steadfast love is established
and your faithfulness, O Lord, is firm.” AMEN!

On a cool evening, long ago,
Mariam closed up her small home that also
served as her shop in the village.

The day had been long and business slow,
but she kept grinding grain and smashing olives
from her garden for oil.

The evening was quiet and she had
just enough bread and a little excess oil
to feed herself in the morning.

And just as Mariam reached her final latch
she noticed a figure on the road.

It was a woman walking slowly.

Her steps were uneven, and her clothes
carried the dust of a long journey.

Strangers were not uncommon to pass
through her village, but neither were
thieves and prostitutes.

Mariam hesitated before pulling the latch and
closing the curtain for the night.

Keeping watch, she saw this stranger come up
the road and to a few paces from her door.

“Peace to you,” she said gently.

“I have no place to rest tonight.
Might you spare a corner of your home?”

Mariam’s first instinct was caution.

She had hardly enough for herself, and
she needed to be ready to open her shop
early the next morning.

Yet, there was something in the woman’s voice,
something in her greeting and posture,
a sincerity that softened her reply.

Mariam also remembered the words often
spoken in mosque:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

“Yes, come in.”

She said and stepped aside.

Mariam set before the stranger what little she had
for the next morning to eat for herself.

Bread crust, a small portion of oil, and a cup of water.

In embarrassment, she apologized for
the meager meal, but it was received
with deep gratitude from the stranger
now turned visitor.

She relished each bite as though it were a feast.

There were few words passed and
the visitor seemed content to go to
the place in the corner to rest.

But before lying down, she asked Mariam if
she may offer a blessing over her home and shop.

Mariam nodded.

She stood, with hands slightly elevated, and
spoke words Mariam did not fully understand,

yet the words seemed to absorb into
the very walls and foundation of the home.

Then a quiet peace followed, within the house and
within her body.

Deeper than anything she'd ever felt before...

The next morning, at sunrise, Mariam rose
to tend to the day and prepare to open for business.

When she reached for the flour jar to see if there'd
be enough to prepare a loaf for a customer,
she paused.

It felt heavier.

She opened the lid, and her breath caught.

It was full.

She went to the canister of oil.

It was also full, as if none had ever been used.

Startled, she went to where the strange visitor
had slept and she was gone.

For days, then weeks, the flour and oil did not run out.

It didn't make her wealthy beyond measure, but
it gave enough cushion to bolster her business
and provide for herself.

She was sustained without lack.

Each evening, after that one,
Mariam would stand in her doorway and
watch the road.

Not out of fear, but with quiet expectation and hope.

For once she'd opened her door to a stranger,
thinking she was giving away her last portion,
but found instead provision that would not leave.

And she would tell anyone who asked,
"Sometimes the smallest welcome makes space
for the greatest gift." (Pause)

I think that this little story encapsulates exactly
what Jesus told his closest followers in our
gospel lesson today.

Six times we heard the word welcome.

It is also translated as "receive."

"Whoever welcomes/receives you," Jesus said,

"Welcomes/Receives me and whoever
welcomes/receives me
welcomes/receives the one
who sent me."

The receiving and the welcoming hold with it
deep implications that enrich the soul. (Pause)

The three verses from Matthew's gospel
include the fascinating line: and whoever gives
EVEN a cup of cold water to these little ones
will not lose their reward.

We Lutherans wonder/bristle over
the language of “rewards”.

And I’m being careful not to attempt to define
what Jesus meant, but to only say
what Jesus said.

The line further fascinates me because
“a cup of cold water” is so simple for most of us
to possess.

And it reminds me of the ways even
the smallest gifts greatly benefit the ones
who are marginalized, displaced, and excluded...
the ones who have nothing. (Pause)

When I consider my own gift giving journey,
I marvel in the way it began so small.

It has grown because my faith has grown,
yet in comparison to another’s gift it might
be described as relatively small.

Yet, the size of the gift seems to not matter to Jesus.

Perhaps because he can take
what is small and multiply it.

I think there’s some other Bible stories that’d support
that miraculous multiplication. :-)

As the faith grows, so does the amount of giving.

Perhaps, this is the power, the power of faith,
that Paul wrote about
in his letter to the Christian community in Rome.

The power to choose between Sin and Freedom.

For Paul sin is less about doing bad or
unhealthy things than it is about like
being stuck in a prison.

For Paul, sin is like a prison.

Why imprison ourselves when Jesus overflows
with grace and gives to all, free of charge -
liberation... freedom to follow our real
master, Jesus. (Pause)

Twice Paul will use the word “sanctification”
in the verses read today.

Like reward, sanctification is foreign language
to most Lutherans, probably because of the ways
it’s been used as a label, or status,
with some Christians.

Paul does not use sanctification in that way.

For Paul, sanctification is used to communicate
a believer’s ongoing life of being set apart

for God and freed from sin's prison.

Like Jesus' progression of small gifts growing
to larger ones, Paul spoke about grasping
the free gift of grace to progress
a moral change of conduct
that may start small,

but the sanctification begun
gradually changes our walk through life.

Instead of selfishness,
or self-preservation,
or living imprisoned -

there's now sanctification as we walk with God.

"Sometimes the smallest welcome,
makes space for the greatest gift."

And all of God's children said... AMEN!