

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

In Belfast, Ireland, a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister and a Jewish rabbi were engaged in a heated theological discussion.

Suddenly an angel appeared in their midst and said to them, “God sends you His blessings. Make one wish for peace and your wish will be fulfilled by the Almighty.”

The Protestant minister said, “Let every Catholic disappear from our lovely island. Then peace will reign supreme.”

The priest said, “Let there not be a single Protestant left on our sacred Irish soil. That will bring peace to this island.”

“And what about you, Rabbi?” said the angel. “Do you have no wish of your own?”

“No,” said the rabbi. “Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen and I shall be well pleased.”

Life would be so much better without irritating people. When we run into someone who gets under our skin, our jaws tighten, and our stomachs turn.

It might be someone in our own family who always rubs us the wrong way. It could be someone at school or at work who routinely says inappropriate or offensive things.

It might be the hotrod on the freeway who passes us at 90 miles per hour and throws us a gesture because we are doing the speed limit.

Life would be so much better if irritating people would disappear, but they don't. They keep popping into our lives and disrupting them.

What makes things worse is that Jesus expects us to love them. Throughout the gospels, he is constantly admonishing us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile.

It is hard enough at times to love the people we care about. How are we to love these people who drive us crazy? Here is where Jesus' words in today's gospel are helpful.

Jesus says that anyone who gives a cup of water to drink to someone because they belong to Christ will not lose his or her reward. There are many ways to interpret Jesus' saying, but certainly this saying has relevance in dealing with difficult people.

It has relevance in two ways. First of all, the action that Jesus describes is a **small one**: to offer a cup of water. Jesus is saying that the way to deal with difficult people is to use small gestures rather than big ones.

We do not need to become close friends with them or invite them to go on vacation with us.

But when we see them doing something well, perhaps we can offer a compliment: "Good work. Well done." When their stapler becomes stuck at the office, perhaps we can offer them ours.

When someone pulls ahead of us into the parking space we have been waiting for, perhaps we can do nothing, just take a deep breath and go on looking for another space.

Jesus is suggesting that when it comes to loving difficult people, we should aim small. We should offer them a simple action of kindness.

"But," you say, "What good will that do? The person might not appreciate the action or even recognize it." True. This is in part what makes them such irritating people.

But here is where a second part of Jesus' saying comes into play. Jesus says that we are to offer a simple action of kindness because the person belongs to Christ.

We offer the compliment or the stapler not because the person will recognize our kindness, but because Jesus will.

We lay off the horn as the jerk passes us on the freeway not because it will make him a better driver, but because Jesus will see our effort and approve it.

So, the next time you have to face an irritating person, try offering a simple action of kindness because they belong to Christ.

Your action will not change the world, but it could change your heart. The person to whom you offer the action might not love you in return, but Jesus will. **And that** is no small matter.

AMEN.