

*A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 26, 2011, Pentecost 2, dedicated to the memory of Harrison Campbell, Sr. who entered eternal peace June 20<sup>th</sup>, to Mark Daniel Ellison, Jr. and Harper Raye Weaver on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Beautiful Reward”**

**Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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He opened the door on a hot summer day and welcomed the stranger as if he were a brother. Standing 6’4” lean, strong and kind, his air-conditioned home was a wonderful respite from the clinging humidity of this sultry Mediterranean port city. The gracious host was Maud Oudeh. He was a leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Haifa, Israel.

The Ahmadiyya Muslims are a small sect within Islam, claiming only 200 million of the 1.2 billion. But they have grown to this number in only 120 years - making them one of the fastest growing movements in any religion. Like the Quakers or Mennonites in Christianity, the Ahmadiyya believe in non-violence and peaceful ways of reconciling conflicts. They differ from all other Muslims in their belief that *jihad* means “the war of the soul” not a violent conflict inflicted through anger or hatred.

When crossing Maud’s threshold, numbers, statistics and theology become seemingly irrelevant. Hospitality, graciousness and generosity are all that matter when one

enters Maud's world. A Stranger becomes a friend. The children gather around seeking to sit next to the man who knows but a few words of their language. If converts are made through food well cooked and served, Maud's mother has brought thousands of followers to this path of Islam at her dinner table! Hand-ground beans for soup, freshly baked homemade bread and exquisite baked chicken with spices that are out of this world, we feast on Arabic food, lovingly prepared and eaten with fingers not forks. The meal makes this faith tastier with each bite. Why leave? Heaven has arrived in Haifa!

Maud said, *"We need to rebuild our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is right, then our problems are fixed. Our enemies become our friends. We face evil with Good and we find that the wounds of relationships with others and with society are healed."* When evening comes, relationships started when doors were simply opened are now grounded in friendship and faith. Strangers no longer, we depart as friends.

In chapter ten of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is teaching his disciples a crash course on taking the "Good News" of his teaching and healing into a hostile world. In other words, Jesus is teaching his disciples discipleship. He goes on a chapter long rant about who they must not see, what family they must leave behind, how to handle rejection and threats of death. Jesus is sending his twelve out two by two into an inhospitable environment and he wants them prepared to teach, heal and lay down their lives if need be.

At the end of this tough talk about discipleship, he comes to this warm set of instructions on welcoming prophets, righteous ones, and children. It is a teaching on the beautiful rewards of hospitality. The tone of the earlier rant changes to a blessing concerning simple things.

*"To receive a stranger is to receive me,"* Jesus tells them. To receive Christ himself is to receive God. To receive a

prophet is to receive (no less) than a spokesperson for God. (And who is a prophet today?) A prophet is one called by God to speak God's message of truth and justice - so receiving a prophet may make your neighbors uncomfortable. If you do it, the promise is that you receive a prophet's reward - a place in the Kingdom of God! To receive *righteous people* is to receive those who obey God. To receive *little ones* can have various meanings — children – the poor – those who are vulnerable. In this context, Jesus is referring to ordinary disciples. A cup of cold water is a small but precious gift to a thirsty person. God rewards even the smallest contribution. The small things matter to God.

You see, hospitality is a gift beyond measure. Opening your home and opening your heart - especially as Jesus points out - to the ones others often reject and turn away, is rewarded by God. God grants a beautiful reward in return - the reward of relationship with God and friendship with humanity.

In the “Garden of the Righteous Ones” at Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Memorial) in Jerusalem you find a garden filled with simple plaques. There you will find a simple plaque which honors “The Righteous Ones” from the community of La Chambon sur-Lignon, in south central France. “The Righteous Ones” are non-Jews who welcomed, hid, protected and saved Jews during the Holocaust. Under the leadership of pastors Andre Trocme and Edouard Theis, this little community of French Protestants from the line of Huguenots who were persecuted for their non-violent beliefs by both Catholics and other Protestants in the 1500’s saved over 5,000 Jews in a town of 2,000 people - right under the nose of the Nazi SS from 1942-1945.

Based on Philip Hallie’s book, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, this powerful film was made a few years ago by the child of one of those Holocaust survivors hidden in Le Chambon; he sat in the kitchen under whose floors his mother was hidden for three years. He asked the aging farmer who had hidden

his mother, "Why did you do this?" Looking confused by the question, the man responded, "What do you mean why?" Again the filmmaker asked, "Why did you hide my mother?" The man answered right away: "Two reasons: Your mother knocked on my door and Jesus told us to love one another. How could I not welcome her? How could I not love her?"

The two sat smiling in silence - one who had saved a life; one who was the living, breathing "beautiful reward" - one generation removed. The young man reached his hand across the table to the grizzled old man, took his hand and said in French, "Thank you." A smile broke across the face of the old farmer and he responded, "Why, of course."

And Jesus said, "*Whoever gives even a cold cup of water (EVEN A COLD CUP OF WATER) to one of these little ones, truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*" All it takes is a cold cup of water to gain the beautiful reward granted by God. Our calling is to live into our covenant with Christ and open the door - the door to our hearts, to our homes. Our gift upon receiving the prophets, the righteous ones, the little children is a beautiful reward - given in return through the love and mercy of God. Amen.

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