

## **JESUS: OUR MOST NEEDED**

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(I take a drink from the glass of cold water on the pulpit).

On Thursday I drove home to Memphis by another road. For a change of scene, I took the Wendell H. Ford Western Kentucky Parkway. I'm sure many of you know you get a much different view when you go there. Anyway, somewhere between here and there I saw a church sign I've never seen before. Some church signs are pretty funny.

*Like, Honk if you love Jesus. Text if you want to meet him.  
Or, If your life stinks, we have a **pew (P-U)** for you!  
Or, Repent! Stop running! Why die tired?*

Here are a few from an expert church-sign-watcher, my wife, Eyleen:

*If you're too open-minded, your brains will fall out.  
Don't let your worries kill you. Let the church help!*

And my personal favorite:

*Do you know what hell is? Come hear our preacher!*

The sign I saw Thursday had an artistic rendering of Jesus, with the caption, "America's Most Needed." (Not "Most Wanted.") It's not very funny. It's a bit clever and kind of trite. But trite things are often true.

We DO need Jesus. And, frankly, Jesus needs us. But we're probably not going to learn this by driving down the road and seeing a sign. Do you remember those posters of Uncle Sam with his finger pointing - the ones so prevalent during World War I? "I want YOU!" Today, as we leave here, we probably won't see a sign of Jesus, saying, "I need you!" (Or will we?)

What we might see is one of those signs I look for whenever I'm entering a new city or town. For more than fifty years, Episcopalians have put up signs to show people the way to their church. They say, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." There are several of them nearby, directing folks here, to St. Matthew's.

Right now, we may be more likely to look for a bookmark, to go with our summer reading, rather than a sign. Maybe a quote from a church saint helps us keep our place. Something like, "Christ has no body here on earth but yours / no hands, no feet on earth but yours." That's from Teresa of Avila, and a nice bookmark, I'd say. It makes me think of the last phrase of St. Matthew's mission statement: "To be Christ's hands in

the world."

Whether it's a bookmark or a billboard, we need signs. In a world of 24/7/365 distractions, we often need some kind of divine sign to get our attention. Jesus knew this. In his day, "sign" was also a word for a miracle. *It would take a miracle*, we sometimes say. Or at least a sign.

Here's a question that evokes an image fit for a church sign: What does it mean to be "Christ's hands in the world?" What does being Christlike *look* like? In today's sound-bite of a Gospel text, Jesus gives us a clue. He's speaking to his disciples about welcome. Jesus, it is often said, welcomed the least, the last and the lost. I'm imagining a sign of Jesus, with open arms and open hands. Maybe that sign includes his disciples, standing around him.

But what IS a disciple? (And do we really have to be one?) Let's try a word that's even less comfortable to our 21st-century ears than "disciple" - the word "missionary." "Mission," simply put, is about being sent out into the world, in the name of Christ. In other words, when we let ourselves become signs of Jesus, we become Christ's disciples, Christ's missionaries.

When I left Memphis in the winter of 2008 to serve in the metro D.C. area, my bishop called me a missionary to Maryland. Although he may have been making a small joke - the way we do when we talk about parts of this country that are foreign to us - he was right. Christian missionaries are not just people who travel overseas. Missionaries are disciples of Christ, sent out to follow in his footsteps, anywhere in the world. Missionaries may not stay very long in any one place, literally or otherwise. We are sent into the world, in Jesus' name - and we probably expect to be welcomed. We expect to be treated with *hospitality*, another good church word.

Jesus' first disciples had that expectation, too, because hospitality - welcoming the stranger - was a common, normative practice in the ancient Near East. But Jesus knew his mission - what he was sending his disciples out to do - would not be well-received by everyone. In fact, chapter ten of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' so-called "missionary discourse," is, in the words of one scholar, "an anti-recruitment speech."

Last week, in her sermon, Bishop Chilton Knudsen's showed us how Jesus, earlier in chapter 10, was giving his disciples what she called the "hard edge" of God's Good News. In essence, Jesus says: if you follow me, you won't just find foes in your family; you may very well *make* them your **enemies**. Jesus is all about loyalty. Our loyalty to God and to Jesus is to be above every other relationship. Another great preacher, Will Willimon, puts it this way: baptismal "water is thicker than blood" (*Peculiar Speech*).

This week, Jesus wraps up his anti-recruitment speech in a more upbeat way - with blessings, not woes. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me," he says (10:40), using the "W" word (welcome) 6 times in three verses. He ends by enhancing the image of open hands: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (10:42).

It's still true. In Jesus' day and in our own day, "cold water" can mean something sacrificial. Even in some parts of the so-called developed world, water is drawn from a deep well, then carried uphill in a heavy jar. The "little ones" given this water are still what Jesus calls at the end of Matthew's Gospel the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The least, last and lost long for something as simple as being handed a cup of cold water.

In Matthew's 10th chapter, Jesus first speaks of the suffering and the hardship his disciples will experience when they take up their own cross and follow him (10:38). He ends his missionary discourse by shifting from those who are sent to those who will receive them, practicing hospitality.

My friends, you practice hospitality *well*. You have been Christ for many, from guests at the food pantry to newcomers at worship. You have been Christ for me. A year ago, I needed a church to be the body of Christ in my life. In the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel, "I was a stranger, and you took me in" (25:35). I needed Jesus; and you were there.

I believe Jesus IS our "most needed." We need Jesus the Christ and all the Christs in our lives. Jesus needs **us** to be Christ for others. We are called to be disciples and missionaries, sent into the world. As the body of Christ, we can help Jesus to be, more and more, America's most needed.