

Readings: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Grace to you and peace from God in Christ Jesus the one who offers welcome through water and word. Amen.

It's an odd little story (I'll admit), but this story about Rick and a sugar egg he's kept for over 40 years has kind of stuck with me this week. You might call it a "human interest" story, you may even dismiss it as childish, but give it a chance and think about what kinds of objects you hold onto – the ticket stub from that first date or the last letter he ever sent or the pair of baby shoes.

At any rate, before you dismiss it, listen to Rick's story and how he came to have the sugar egg. It might help to know that as a child, Rick's family moved all the time. They hardly lived in one place for more than a year, and so (as you can guess) Rick almost never made friends. That is, until Rick was 8 years old, when he lived a year in Washington and against all odds (maybe for the first time in his life), he made a friend, named David.

Well the time came again for Rick's family to move, this time to Idaho. And it just so happened, the day they were scheduled to move was David's birthday. His parents told him he couldn't go to the birthday party, but Rick snuck away on moving day, just for a few minutes to knock shyly on the front door where his friend David presented 8 year old Rick with an edible sugar egg. Which Rick says he held onto for the entire drive to Idaho.

That was in 1970 and Rick still keeps this sugar egg. And you might dismiss the story as childish, but the reason I begin with this story is because of why *adult* Rick says he kept the egg so long: "The truth is, I knew it's importance immediately and it hasn't changed. I looked at this egg and it was proof, *physical proof*, that I had been invited to a birthday party and that there was a hope of making a friendship. And I held onto it because I needed that proof."¹

¹ The story came from the audio podcast entitled "Things" on *Radiolab* (Season 12: Episode 8), found at: www.radiolab.org/story/things/

This story about how “stuff” (for lack of a better word), physical objects (whether an egg or a ticket stub, a letter or a pair of shoes) have the power to hold “hope” (for lack of a better word) turned how I heard these few short verses from the Gospel of Matthew completely inside out.

They come at you, these words of Jesus, almost like a one-two, one-two-*three* punch. They’re brief, but indeed they pack a punch, don’t they?

In these three short verses (which happen to be the final words that Jesus speaks to the twelve before they’re sent out to *be disciples*), Jesus sets up this pattern. “Whoever welcomes A, welcomes B. And whoever welcomes B, welcomes C.” That’s the one-two...*and just when you think you’ve got the pattern?*

Well, then Jesus goes for another one-two: “Whoever welcomes A, will receive the reward of A. And whoever welcomes B, will receive the reward of B.”

Jesus sort of lulls you with these abstract words for hospitality: “welcome” and “receive.” But then Jesus comes out of nowhere with the knock out punch – with something *hard* and *concrete*: “and whoever gives *even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones.*”

Like a simple sugar egg, like giving *even a cup of cold water* (Jesus seems to say), neither hospitality nor hope (these abstract ideas that we sometimes think run our universe) really *mean anything* until they are given, until they are *imbued into* the “stuff” of life. Hope is something best touched (Jesus seems to say), *welcome* and *hospitality* are best tasted like a cup of cold water.

(At the risk of turning this into Confirmation 101 class), it’s something that just so happens to be at the center of all that we believe as Lutherans and how God acts in the world. “A sacrament...” (this fancy word for “the means that God gives grace in the world”)... *A sacrament* Martin Luther might say, *is a word of promise transmitted in visible form.*

So we as Lutherans talk about two sacraments. First, in baptism (this sacrament of welcome into God’s family), the *word of promise* is this: “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” But it comes *transmitted in visible form* with a basic thing, a substance you can touch – *cool water washing over you.*

Then there's the sacrament of communion (which we'll celebrate here at the table in just a few minutes) and *all* will hear this *word of promise* from Jesus: "This is my body, *given for you*...and this cup is the new covenant [the new word of promise] in my blood, shed for you and for all people *for the forgiveness of sin*." But it's *transmitted in visible form*, isn't it? You can taste the forgiveness through the *bread* and the *cup*.

And maybe this is why we come to church week after week – not just to hear words of promise, but to be reminded that God gives these words of promise *in visible form*. It's like training, we come together to experience touching and tasting God's grace so that when we're out in the world, we'll learn to see it and touch it and taste it out there too.

As I get ready to move to a new call (as you can imagine), I've been going through book-shelves and filing cabinets, getting rid of things I don't need. But (*if you'll permit me just a moment of nostalgia*) this week I came across a little folder of papers from when I interviewed here at Custer Lutheran Fellowship, 8 years ago in June. And I came across this note with bold, capital letters at the top: "**WELCOME TO CUSTER, KENT AND ELIZABETH!**"

It was a note from the person we stayed with. Could've been anybody, but it happened to be Dorothy Delicate. And included on the note were a few instructions about when she'd be home, where to find the phone, along with a list of food for breakfast, fruit for whenever, and snacks. Cantaloupe. Watermelon. Grapefruit. Bananas. Hershey almond kisses. Three kinds of cookies. Chips. Mozzarella string cheese. *Just so you know, you had me at "Three kinds of cookies."*

And we give thanks that *words of promise* – words of hospitality, words of welcome, *words of hope* – are *transmitted in visible form* in so many ways here at Custer Lutheran Fellowship and all around us in this community. I hope and I trust it's not just me and my family that have tasted God's grace over a meal of fried chicken and mashed potatoes on a Wednesday evening here at Custer Lutheran Fellowship.

I hope and trust that if you haven't, that you will sip God's welcome with a cup of coffee on Sunday mornings, that you'll taste God's welcome with a slice of cheese or summer sausage, *maybe even something sweet*.

I hope and trust that if you haven't, that you will touch God's hope with a handshake and the words of our welcome statement: "*We want it to be of public record...that all are welcome here at Custer Lutheran Fellowship!*" I hope and trust you'll touch God's word of presence through a hug with a word that is sometimes spoken without words: "*I'm so sorry for your loss.*"

In the end, it's at the center of all that we believe as Christians – how we believe God acts in this world of ours. *Incarnation* is the fancy word for it, the way God "takes on flesh" – takes on the 'stuff' of the world, *is imbued in the substance of stuff*. The way God lives out the Word of promise as literally as God can – with hands and feet, with flesh and bones.

It's a scandal, of course. Because flesh decays and bones can break, and what use really is a God who can decay – a broken God? But this is the best way to offer a word of hope, a word of promise, a word of hospitality, a word of welcome... God in Christ Jesus seems to say. It's the God who takes not only abstract words like *welcome* and *hope* and *forgiveness* seriously, but it's the God who takes this *world* of ours seriously, who takes this *flesh* of ours seriously, who takes the need for *fresh water* and *daily bread* seriously.

I'm not sure what grace, what salvation, what hope, what forgiveness, what God's Word of promise will look like on the other side of the grave, but I've come to appreciate over these eight years as your pastor – that God's Word of promise looks simple, childish at times even, but it looks like a well-worn and wrinkled hand holding tightly to the hand of a *little eight year old*, both speaking together those words, "...your will be done...give us this day our daily bread...forgive us...as we forgive..."

God's Word of promise looks simple, childish even, but it looks like water splashed over the brow as the words are heard, "We praise you for the gift of water that sustains life, and...we praise you for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ." God's Word of promise looks simple, childish even, but it looks like bread and a cup with the words spoken over you, "The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in God's grace."

Thanks be to God for this house of welcome in which we all receive as *children* of God. May we go out this morning, ready to build houses of welcome in all we do, even if it means something as childish as a cup of cold water, but let us *give it in the name of Christ*. Because when given in the name of Christ, it's given in the name of hope, it's given with the promise that God indeed is with us in word and flesh. Thanks be to God. Amen.