Back in my early twenties a pastor from the local Lutheran Church in Hanna came to visit me. You see, I was on the member roster of Redeemer Lutheran, but I had not attended there, or any church, for quite some time. In fact, at this point at my life, I was really struggling with my faith. This pastor, who had just started at Redeemer, was making it his business to visit everyone on the roster, whether active or not. So, one day he phoned and asked if he could come by. I was not really interested in visiting with him, but not wishing to offend the man, I told him it would be OK. So he came by and we talked for a couple of hours. Eventually the conversation turned to my lack of attendance. Being upfront, I told him of my struggles with my faith and how I was not really sure what I believed anymore. I told him all of my objections to Christian truth claims and he listened intently. He didn’t really argue with me or try to counter everything I was saying, but he just listened and took it all in.

As he got up to leave, he told me he would pray for me and my struggles, and that Jesus, whether I believed it or not, would always be there for me if I ever I chose to answer his call. I thanked him, but make it clear that I really was not all that interested. I am not sure what the pastor was feeling when he left my house. Did he feel that the visit was a failure? Did he think I was a lost cause? Did he himself feel like a failure because he was not successful in getting me to come to worship? I don’t know he felt, but I can say for absolute certainty that his visit was anything but a failure – even if I hadn’t decided eventually to become a pastor.
We are such a results-driven people aren’t we? Not only do we want results, though, we want results quickly. And because we are an instant results-driven people, what we often perceive as failure is really nothing of the sort. For example, quite often when we summon the courage to risk telling a non-believer about Jesus, we are really only expecting two immediate responses: complete and utter rejection, or immediate acceptance and enthusiasm for the message we are revealing to them – almost as if we are the ones who are going to make this person into a Christian believer, as if the whole encounter hinges on our own persuasiveness and tenacity. If rejection is the response, then we know that further conversation at this point will probably do more harm than good. When the response is immediate acceptance, then we rejoice in our victory and, with equal enthusiasm, begin feeding them worship times and locations.

So, there are two responses to our efforts at witnessing to the gospel, and two obvious responses to those responses? Right? No! There is, in fact, a third response to our efforts, but it is a response that we are, in a way, least comfortable with. Jesus calls it the “cup of cold water.” And, ironically, it is the response that has the potential to remind us, more than the other two responses, that it is God, not us, who will bring a person to faith.

In Matthew 10 Jesus is preparing to send the twelve disciples out into the world. He is endowing them with authority to heal the sick and drive demons out of the possessed. He is instructing them not to take any extra clothing or food with them, as they will be well looked after by the “people of peace” whom they will encounter in their journeys. He is warning them to expect persecution, and is at the same time comforting them with the assurance of the Holy Spirit’s presence as they go about their way. He is revealing to them, in very plain language, what it takes to be his disciple, and that they can expect to unleash chaos as families and friends turn on each other over the truth of the gospel.
But then Jesus also reveals to the disciples what they can expect as they encounter “people of peace”. *Those who welcome you, Jesus says to them, are really welcoming Me, and by extension, God the Father.* Those people of peace, as they welcome the disciples for who they are and for who they represent will receive their just reward; inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. *Oh, and by the way, says Jesus, even if someone gives you, my little ones, so much as a cup of cold water, then that someone will likewise not lose their reward.*

Jesus knows that the disciples are going to face their fair share of outright rejection; people who, in a best case scenario, will merely reject the free gift of Jesus’ salvation promise with a smug wave of the hand. He also knows that they will encounter *people of peace;* the ones who will open their hearts and homes to them. They will invite them in and attend to their every need. They will hang on every word that the disciples will have to say about Jesus and the gospel message.

Jesus also knows, however, that not everyone whom the disciples will encounter will fit into one of these two categories. The disciples will also encounter those who will welcome them, in a lukewarm sort of way, and perhaps the hospitality granted them will consist of nothing more than a mere *cup of cold water.* These folks may listen to the gospel message in a detached, unenthusiastic manner, but the fact that the disciples are not hotly rejected outright means that they are at least willing to listen, even if it is only to be polite.

Perhaps these folks will not respond immediately, but the offer of the cup of cold water means that they are at least not hostile to the disciples, nor are they completely hardened to the possibilities of faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps they simply need some time of quiet reflection before exploring the Gospel further. Perhaps some of them lead the sort of life that offers the false security of believing that they are not really in need of a saviour, and so they need time to
re-examine what is really important in life before that realization can find purchase. Perhaps, as the words of the disciples mill around their heads, and the Holy Spirit begins to work in their heart, they will drop their skepticism long enough to allow faith to take root. What the disciples need to realize, though, is they may never witness the transformation of these people, and so won’t have the opportunity to share in their joy. The disciples also need to keep in mind that they are not going to save anyone; their mission is to deliver the message of hope. The Holy Spirit, who accompanies the disciples on their mission, will do that work of salvation.

As our society grows increasingly secularized and slips increasingly under the guise of a wrongly understood tolerance, we, as Christians, are more and more likely to encounter those who will at least give us a cup of cold water. There are certainly those out there will respond to our efforts with hostility – all of us have experienced that. We have also experienced the joy of bringing the message to those who are desperately in need of Jesus, and know that they are in desperate need of Jesus.

What we really fear today are those whose eyes glaze over and facial expression morphs into a neutral sort of detached look that communicates to us that we are probably wasting our time. Not so fast, says Jesus. They can hear us; they can understand the words that we are saying, and many cannot help but at least think about the words of the Gospel message long after we have left the scene.

By God’s grace, the pastor who came to visit me nearly twenty-five years ago did get to see the results of the faith that he awoke in me. He did not change me that day, though, nor was he the one who changed me at all. But, after that visit, I was much more open to others who shared their faith with me, including my wife. Six or seven years ago, when I told him that I was going to seminary, his response was: “It’s about time!”
Many of us may never see the results of our encounters with those who offer us a *cup of cold water*. And, truthfully, some may never soften their hearts long enough to give up their resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit. But, Jesus reveals to us, that the sharing of the gospel with them is never a waste of time. It is never a waste of time, because it is not our efforts that will win someone over to Christ. We have no idea the effects that the words of the Gospel will have on those we reveal them to. Our effect on the non-believer may not come just from the words we say to them, but also from our actions. How many times have we heard stories that go like this: “I wish so and so was still alive, so I can tell her the effect she had on my life. I was lost in my own sin, but now I am alive in Jesus Christ, and I wish she could see me now.”

Jesus challenges us today to accept the *cup of cold water* whenever it is offered to us. He reveals to us today that the *cup of cold water* has the potential to be an open door for the truth of the Gospel to work in the heart of those offering us the *cup of cold water*. Jesus asks us to be patient and trust in God to do what needs to be done. Jesus reveals to us that none of these people are a lost cause, not even incidentally, those who choose to be hostile as we reach out to them with the love of Christ. Jesus reminds us today to continually pray for all of those who we have communicated the Gospel to: Friends, parents, our children, our neighbours, our co-workers, the stranger on the bus. Jesus died and rose again for all of them too and desires nothing more than for them to know him, and to come to him in faith.

Friends, as we are out in the world, sharing our faith with others, and living out our faith in obedience to Jesus, let us not become discouraged by the ways of the world. Let us instead constantly remind ourselves that it is God, not we, who is in charge; it is God who will do the work of planting faith in the hearts of the lost; and it is God who will provide us with the strength we need to accept from his lost, but precious children, a *cup of cold water*. Amen.