

A Cup of Cold Water A sermon based on Proverbs 25:19-28, Romans 6:12-23 and Matthew 10:40-42 delivered on Sunday, June 28, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC Of Onkama, Michigan.

“He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me.... And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” (vv. 40 & 42) Whoever receives you receives me, Jesus reminds us. What an awesome thought! What a powerful call to practice hospitality!

I wonder how many of us think of hospitality as a special divine call “or mission” when we simply welcome someone into our home, our church, our organization or our community. Does it even cross our minds when we open our homes and our places of security to others, even to the stranger, the foreigner, the different one, the little ones, as Matthew puts it, to think that in this simple act of welcoming, we are also welcoming Jesus and God into our midst? What a difference this might make if we all kept this principle of hospitality in mind: that we are entertaining Jesus in the stranger.

Our own former United Church of Christ General Minister and President, John Thomas, in speaking of the national identity campaign of the UCC “God is Still Speaking,” often used one of his own favorite phrases coined in 2001, “extravagant welcome,” in describing what he feels our local churches should be about. The United Church News at the time of the launch of this campaign reported that Thomas elaborated on that call to be hospitable. He spoke of “evangelical courage.” Thomas was quoted as saying, “The Stillspeaking Initiative is not just about welcoming people to a friendly community, but to a courageous discipleship, to a particular set of commitments. It’s not an extravagant welcome to an anything goes religion, to a comfortable form of Christianity, but to a costly form of discipleship.” The article went on to point out that Boundary-stretching hospitality,

to be sure, is a form of gospel-centered courage. But Thomas reminded us, “its not the only thing faith demands of us.”

At the same time, The General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA, Dr. A. Roy Medley, sent a report to all local churches concerning the fact that a representative group of ABC folks, meeting for 24 hours of reflection and discernment on hospitality in 2005, affirmed the mission of the church as articulated in the statement of the Seek It! Summit of June 2004. That statement contained these words of radical welcome, “Through the cross of Christ we embrace the world as neighbor.”

These “hospitality” movements in the mainline church, are now 20 years old. How have these movements which we now simply honor with the statement on our bulletins, websites and newsletters by proclaiming, “Whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here” affected us? Do we in 2026, actually define our discipleship in terms of this kind of extravagant welcome and radical neighborliness? Or, is this just a nice statement for the front page of a webpage?

When Paul states in Romans 6:12: “offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.” This is a stark description of “Radical” hospitality for we are being asked “to offer every part of ourselves.” As we open the doors of our hearts, our minds, our spirits and our homes and churches, we are being asked to offer our “whole selves” to our guests.

Matthew’s gospel makes it simple enough. The author tells us that something as seemingly insignificant as offering a cup of cold water will qualify us for a “hospitality badge.” As our Proverbs passage poetically states: “cold water to

a weary soul is good news from a distant land.” And yet, how often do we turn away or avoid offering even so little as this to a stranger, to someone who looks different from us to someone who is dirty or unkempt? When someone stops us on a city street to ask for spare change from us, do we think “I will give you a quarter so that if you get three more, you can buy something to quench your thirst on this hot day, I do this because I can see the Jesus in you.” Or do we more often than not, judge that the money will not be used to buy the “proper” things and so we say, “No, go away” and then turn away ourselves? Do we even give them the simple courtesy of making eye contact with them?

The late Mother Teresa, in talking of her work among the destitute and dying on the streets of Calcutta, spoke poignantly of what just a cup of drinkable, non-polluted, cold water can do for one of God’s children. This cup of cold potable water was often the only thing that she had to offer to the lost humanity that teemed throughout the streets where she ministered. This cup of cold water is not unlike the “well of water” that we heard about last week which God provided to Hagar in Genesis 21:19 in the desert where she had been exiled by Abraham and Sarah. This is the well of water with which she could refill the skin of water she had drained, and was able to revive her son, Ishmael. This is the water of life . . . nothing less!

When Mother Teresa spoke of bathing those who were dying with cool, clean water and seeing the smile of Jesus on their faces as, too weak to even talk; they thanked her only with their eyes for these ministrations. Saint Teresa would be heard to remark that, this bath, this baptism of cool, clean water often turned out to be these persons only burial preparation.

Most of us will not be called to offer the “cup of cold water” in such a dramatic way as Mother Teresa or God did to Hagar or the proverbial cold water to

the weary soul, but how are we being asked to do just that in our own settings, in our own homes, churches, and places of work? Listen to this story of one church that took the Gospel of Matthews simple rules for hospitality to heart:

Upon arriving at his new church appointment, St. Marks United Methodist Church in downtown Atlanta, Dr. Michael Cordle discovered he had inherited a struggling inner- city congregation with an attendance rate that hovered somewhere under 100. A few Sundays after arriving, the Cordle family stepped outside the church after services and was stunned to see a steady stream of exuberant marchers parading down their street. This was Atlanta's "Pride Parade," which draws its ever-growing number of participants primarily from the gay and lesbian community. As they watched the people streaming by, it struck Cordle that these were some of the people of St. Marks neighborhood – this was part of the parish.

A year later, when the Pride Parade participants reached the front of St. Marks Church, they were met with an unexpected surprise. On that hot and steamy June afternoon, the church had set up a small oasis – offering cups of cold water to all the marchers who felt hot and thirsty and tired. In no time, the water was gratefully guzzled down, and St. Marks UMC had transformed its image in the face of that neighborhood.

What a difference from the other nearby church that bordered the parade route, That church sent out its message loud and clear – as it erected barricades, strung up temporary fencing, hired mounted policemen to ride their perimeters, and posted "no trespassing" signs across church property. The cups of cold-water St. Marks still offer on parade day have brought all sorts of thirsty neighbors inside the doors of the church once more. Membership climbed to over 400 in the two years after they began this ministry of hospitality, and the neighborhood feels like it has a spiritual presence in its midst again.

Given the same circumstances, which church would we be? The one that showed extravagant hospitality or the one that barricaded itself in "fear of the stranger" If a similar group of marginalized persons, say migrant workers for sake of argument, began to have a bigger impact on the township of Onokama, what would we do? Would we, like a real town near where I used to serve, seek to see if they should be turned into Immigration Services as possible illegal aliens, or would we seek to welcome them?

Would we, like a neighboring town to my first churches in the mid-west, begin to buy up all the land zoned for use as mobile home parks so that the workers could not find affordable housing and have to leave, or would we set about finding ways to offer a “cup of cold water” to these people by making services available to them? I ask again, which church would we be? Or, more to the point, which church ARE we?

In our small-town setting which church do we represent? The one that welcomes the outsiders among us, or the one that turns away? Before you answer, really think about it, for this is a very important question and one to which each and every one of us needs to search in our heart of hearts for an answer. The Gospel message couldn't be any clearer. When we welcome persons of all kinds in our midst, we are welcoming Jesus. When we offer food and shelter and hope, we are offering food and shelter and hope to Jesus. The opposite is also true. When we reject the stranger, we are rejecting Jesus. When we do not offer the cup of cold water, we are refusing to quench Jesus' thirst; and, even more to the point, we are rejecting “the one who sent him.” In neglecting to hospitality, then, we are in many ways rejecting God. What a difference it would make in this world if we all could keep this one simple rule in mind

In her book Be My Guest, a pastor's wife, Vivian Anderson Hall, says this: “I do not believe that I have the gift of hospitality, in fact I am not sure that there is such a gift. . . .When God commands us to be hospitable, He is not asking us to be perfect; He is asking us to share our imperfect selves and our imperfect homes with the people he chooses to send to us. He will not ask us to share what we do not have, but he will ask us to use what we have.”

When we keep the commandment to be hospitable, we express Gods love by sharing “what we have,” Hall reminds us. As a community of faith do we do this,

or do we find reasons not to: i.e. “It’s not in our budget. We are all getting too old to do that. There isn’t enough room. If they use the church they might make a mess. They are just not our kind of people, you know” Do any of these excuses sound familiar?

There are a lot of pat phrases that have been used to talk about radical hospitality: “Do, Work, Love,” “Come As You Are,” “Extravagant Welcome,” “Evangelical Courage,” “Ministry of Reconciliation,” and even our very own UCC initiative “God is Still Speaking,” but logos and sayings are just words, they are empty promises without some action being attached to them.

Matthew tells us that Jesus says: “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, . . .and 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.” A simple cup of cold water can be all it takes to provide divine hospitality—to quench the thirst of Jesus—yes, Jesus, sitting right there at the table with you! Will you take the glass, go over to the sink, run the water until it is cool, fill the glass and serve our Savior? . . . Amen