

**Pastor Kevin:**

The Lord be with you.

This is the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Saint Matthew the tenth chapter.

Jesus said to the twelve, "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me, whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, 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."

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

[Crowd] Grace to you all Christ.

Grace to you in peace from the one who calls you the love of all men.

[Crowd] There's something fitting about hearing this Gospel of doors.

Usually we gather inside our own sanctuaries.

We know where to sit.

We know which door to use.

We know where the bathrooms are.

We know the familiar rhythms of the congregation.

Today is different.

Today we are guests in creation.

Beneath these trees at Heartland Forest, we have reminded that before there were church buildings, there was creation itself.

Before there were sanctuaries built with stone and timber, there was the cathedral of sky, the bird song, and wind moving gently through the leaves.

And perhaps that is a perfect place to hear Jesus speak about welcome.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me.

As I look through the forest this morning, I notice something that forests seem to do effortlessly.

No single tree stands alone.

Beneath our feet hidden from view, their roots intertwine.

We share water, nutrients, even signals of distress.

What appears to be a collection of individual trees is in many ways, one living community.

Perhaps the church was always called to look more like that.

Today congregations from across the Niagara area have come together, and we each have our own history, our own traditions, our own ways of singing and serving.

Yet this morning, we remember something deeper than what distinguishes us.

We belong to Christ, and that is where Jesus begins.

These verses come at the end of a difficult conversation.

Jesus has warned the disciples that following him will not always be comfortable.

Some doors will close, some people will reject them, some relationships will be strained, and Jesus refuses to let fear have the last word.

Instead, he speaks of welcome.

Not because welcome is easy, but because welcome is where Christ becomes visible.

One of my favorite writers, Padre Gautuma, writes that, "Belonging begins when someone makes room for another."

That image stays with me because belonging is never accidental.

It's something we choose.

We make room in our schedules, in our conversations, in our communities, and most importantly, in our hearts.

That's the kind of welcome Jesus describes.

And when we welcome one another, we do not simply receive another person, we receive Christ, and in receiving Christ, we receive the one who sent him.

That means every encounter carries the possibility of becoming something holy.

And notice that Jesus ends with something wonderfully ordinary, a cup of cold water, not wealth, not influence, not impressive accomplishments, just water.

It's a reminder that the Kingdom of God is often built through small acts that often go unnoticed, a conversation after worship, an invitation to sit together, a hand offered in friendship, a meal shared with someone who needed company more than they needed food.

Those moments rarely make the history books, yet they may be the very places where heaven quietly touches earth.

As Lutherans, we have sometimes been tempted to think of ourselves as separate congregations, working alongside one another.

But perhaps today is an invitation to imagine something richer.

Like the trees surrounding us, our roots are already connected in Christ.

Our ministries nourish one another, our prayers strengthen one another, and our witness becomes more compelling when we remember that none of us is called to flourish alone.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts of gathering here today.

We are reminded that the church is larger than any one congregation, larger than our buildings, larger than our differences.

The church is a people learning again and again how to make room for one another because Christ has first made room for us.

And as we leave this place, we will return to different communities and different ministries, but we do not return alone.

We carry with us the memory of this forest, where many trees stood together beneath one sky.

And together these trees do more than survive.

They cool the air, shelter the birds and animals, hold the soil in place, filter the water, and quietly breathe life into the world through the oxygen they release.

Their strength is not found in isolation, but in the gift they become together.

May that become an image of the church that God is still growing among us, rooted in Christ, making room for one another, serving the world, offering cups of cold water in a thirsty world, and discovering to our surprise and joy that whenever we welcome others, Christ has already been there.

Amen.

### **Pastor Bart:**

[ Laughter ] For showing up on this journey.

Pastor Kevin's words remind me of the book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*.

And I remember a portion of that book talking about how trees communicate, and they communicate through their root systems and through the respiration from leaves and needles.

And if there is a single tree in trouble in a forest, the others know it, and they send nutrients from themselves out to that troubled tree without discriminating.

Well, that's a fur tree.

That's their business.

I don't mean to do that.

[ Laughter ] But sensing that there is a need for healing and nourishment, the trees respond, because that's what trees simply do.

And maybe that's something of what Jesus has to say about who we are, that when we sense need, we remember our connectedness.

And if I can practice forest tree without a license, maybe for another minute, many of you know that the birch tree is actually part of a very intricate organism.

That the root systems are all interconnected, so that literally one individual tree is part of a root system and all of the other birch trees growing together.

And maybe that metaphor is helpful for us as well, as we think about, that even in our welcoming and in our attempts to try to make sense of our call as church, that we really do belong together, and that we are literally rooted and joined together in ways that maybe we can't see or always appreciate.

## **Pastor Chun**

So thank you, Pastor Kevin, for calling our attention to the gifts of creation today to help us reflect a bit about who and who we are. [laughter] [laughter] Well, it's the way to adjust it, to feed every situation as the church is supposed to do, right?

Yeah, I still remember when I was in seminary and there is a doctor out.

A lot of you know him, right?

And his daughter is living in Toronto, so he told us whenever he goes to see his daughter and he has a lot of tunies in his pocket in order to give one of them to the homeless that he encountered.

Not only that, and he challenged us, the seminarians, us, us, have you ever sit with those homeless people even once and talk with them?

What they need the most is not a tuning or loony or even \$20.

They need people to see them, to talk to them, to treat them as a person, not only a need.

Today the gospel reading one word hit me the most is a cup of cold water.

Just think about that image.

In a hot summer day, not here in the park and in the shade.

We are walking through the wilderness.

What do you want the most?

What do you need the most?

A cup of cold water.

And when Jesus was asking his disciples to do, it's not to give people what do you think they need.

It's to really go and tell them and hear them what they need.

A cup of cold water.

I hope today you bring that image back home and think about that.

All the ministry that we are doing and we plan to do.

Every single kind movement that you are doing to the people you think they need it takes some time to talk to them.

To really listen and see them as a whole human person.

That is the calling from Christ to all his disciples, including us.