

Matthew 10:40-42

I read a murder mystery recently whose title I will not divulge because I'm about to give away the ending. This way you won't know if you're reading it, and I won't have ruined it. But the character who's trying to solve the murder is an academic, and she realizes that every person who's died has smelled like camphor. So she rouses a colleague who teaches chemistry ["a pleasant young man despite having spent his formative years at Cambridge"], and asks him, "Is there a poison that smells like camphor?"

"Camphor?" he said doubtfully.

"Yes, I said, "camphor."

"Camphor," he said again, as if attempting to familiarise himself with a newly learnt word in a foreign language.

"Yes, camphor," I said again. Scientists are not like us: one must be patient with them.

"Hilary," said my young colleague, "is this one of those questions people keep asking in Oxford about the Provost of Oriel?"

"My dear boy," I said, "what has the Provost of Oriel to do with it?"

"I mean, is it one of those questions about whether I say that I saw someone going into Blackwells who looked like the Provost of Oriel and it actually was the Provost of Oriel, it's true or not to say that he looked *like* the Provost of Oriel? Because if it's that sort of question I honestly don't think I'm up to it at this hour of the morning."

"Do you mean," I said, "that camphor is itself a poison?"

"Well, yes, of course. Didn't you know?"ⁱ

The penny drops for our detective as she realizes that the victims were not killed by something that smelled like camphor, but by camphor itself which, taken internally, is fatal, though it's fine to apply topically. **In the same way**, Jesus is saying that anyone who receives one of his apostles, sent out to replicate Jesus' own work in the world, receives not only that apostle but Jesus himself *and* "the one who sent me," God. It is not *like* receiving Jesus himself, it *is* receiving Jesus himself. Those who go out in Jesus' name are prophets, righteous people, and "little ones," or people of low stature. And I don't think he means there are three kinds of

apostles; I think he's saying that those who go out are simultaneously all of those things. Yet to do even so small a kindness as to give cold water to the apostle of low stature is to welcome Christ himself.

This is a familiar verse, and a familiar concept. But it's profound, and worth lingering on. The poet James Russell Lowell wrote a poem--James Russell Lowell is the one who wrote the hymn "Once To Every Man and Nation" with that great line

New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.

But he wrote another one, quite a long one, called "The Vision of Sir Launfal," in which he tells about a nobleman who left his castle in search of the Holy Grail. On his way out, he scornfully tossed a gold coin to a leper begging at his doorstep, but the leper rejected it because of the spirit in which it had been given. A long time later Sir Launfal returns, unsuccessful, gray and bent. "No more on his surcoat was blazoned the cross, But deep in his soul the sign he wore, The badge of the suffering and the poor."

He sees the leper and exclaims that in him he sees an image of Christ, who was "a little one," a person of low estate who suffered, and he gives what he has, a moldy crust of brown bread. A voice that the reader understands to be the voice of Christ says,

... The Holy Supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
**Who gives himself with his alms feeds three,
Himself, his hungry neighbor, and me."**

Here again we see that giving to the humble neighbor is not *like* giving to Christ; it *is*

giving to Christ. But even more, it is also giving to oneself. This is a radical statement of our radical unity with the divine. Not a good relationship with the divine, but a unity with the divine. And giving, or sharing with, the humblest person in the name of Jesus is the way, the method, of coming to realize this truth at our deepest level.

We've always known that spiritual practices like the practice of sharing were vital to our own spiritual formation. We want to share because we want to make the world a better place, but we cannot sustain the effort of consistent hospitality unless we find a way for the practice to feed us, rather than exhaust us. I recently heard an interview with a scholar of the cognitive science of religion, Sarah Lane Ritchie, and some of what she had to say really helped me understand more about how we pursue that spiritual formation.

The cognitive science of religion looks at the ways that religious beliefs might be a byproduct of the ways that our minds naturally work. This could be a source of anxiety--thinking that if it's natural, it's not the product of revelation and therefore it's reducible to biochemical reactions--that we're fooling ourselves if we think our intuitions of the divine correspond to reality. But Ritchie says that's not how she sees it. She says "Because if you believe in some sort of God, or ultimate reality, that can act creatively in the world through evolution . . . then wouldn't you expect humans to have evolved with the capacity to understand and know and interact with God? Wouldn't we need to have naturally evolved the capacity to form the sorts of beliefs that we have?"ⁱⁱⁱ

She goes on to talk about how we develop/nurture *what* we believe, recalling her struggle in her youth to believe in a God "worth calling God". "It's just not scientifically the case that beliefs occur in some disembodied rational deliberation process. . . ." Because of the

plasticity of our brains, we can cultivate a way of experiencing the world that enhances our faith. She points out that we are embodied creatures, and that movement and art and environment matters. "And then the third thing is attention. Where are we directing our focus and attention? When we pay attention to something, when we focus on something, it becomes more real to us." It's too long an interview for me to do it justice, but what I took from it is that we become able to be nourished by generosity instead of depleted by it BY paying attention to companions who are engaged in the same practice. In other words, to be Christians, we must have communities of Christians. We need those relationships and we need companions in our practices, and those *will* form us as people who, like Sir Launfal, find the Holy Grail within ourselves--the divine and the creature, united.

Sarah Lane Ritchie refers to an article on "spiritual realism" by Tim Shriver and Terra Isabella Burton that looks super-interesting.^{iv} It says, in part: [critiquing society as "us" and diagnosing what's wrong with us]

We may be scientific realists, but we are no longer *spiritual* realists, willing and able to treat our hunger for purpose, meaning, and community as pointing to necessary elements of human life – as something more than a purely personal or private desire.

Our current way of thinking is deficient in ways that are making us sick and scared, and separated from the gifts and values that make life meaningful. We are blind to these gifts, refusing to receive them: often, we are blind simply because we don't look, because our belief system has told us that there is nothing to look for. And the result is social and political enmity . . .

What Jesus is teaching, in his directions to the disciples to go out and replicate his work, is a way of paying attention to the gifts and values that make life meaningful. It's a practice, practiced *together*, that brings into focus what was there all along, the kingdom in its fullness, the Christ in the eyes of our neighbor. The practice of hospitality is the way, the road, and also

the end.

Let us pray:

God of abundant hospitality, Jesus tells us that in Your house there are many mansions, a place for all of Your children. So may our lives become a spacious sanctuary where all who enter it would find peace, rest, and adventure, and be blessed of Your love for having been welcomed there. As we have been the recipients of Your living water in Christ Jesus to the point of our cup overflowing, move us from hostility to hospitality so that we would have all we need to carry out Jesus' instructions of offering a cold cup of water to any of Your children. It's for the sake of the gospel message and Your kingdom of many blessings that we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Sarah Caudwell, *The Sibyl in Her Grave*. New York: Delacorte Press/Random House, 2000, p. 265.

ⁱⁱ https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17119/17119-h/17119-h.htm#THE_VISION_OF_SIR_LAUNFAL

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/episode-19-sarah-lane-ritchie-belief-the-brain/>

^{iv} <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/politics/spiritual-realism-in-a-divided-america>