

Marching in the Pride Parade is a good spiritual discipline for us as Church.

Not only does it connect us across denominations and styles with Christians in other congregations and remind us that the Church has no special pre-eminence in what the world is doing--we need to take a number and get in line like everyone else--but marching in the Pride Parade gets us marching, our feet moving, not just up and down our safe center aisle, but a specific direction in a violent, volatile, uncontrollable world.

Marching in the Pride Parade reminds us that Church is not a place we go to but a movement we go with.

Jesus created Church to be a community on the move, not a building on the corner, a river rather than a pond.

Today's gospel is the last portion of a gathered pool just before a waterfall.

Jesus is finishing up a long section of instructions to his disciples, whom he is sending out with marching orders into the world.

Those of us who regularly march in the Pride Parade may have a skewed idea of this, because what we experience in the parade is deceptive, a backward mirror image of what Jesus prepares his disciples to expect.

In the Pride Parade, we are welcomed with cheers, open arms, beaming smiles, tears of joy, thumbs up, thank yous, the grateful appreciation of thousands, with one tiny pocket of protest toward the end, one strident corner of resistance and rejection.

Flip that, reverse that ratio, and you have Jesus' sobering words to his disciples.

Most of their march will be miserable, he indicates.

Take no money, bag, or extra shoes.

Expect misunderstanding, rejection, criticism, interrogation, flogging and maybe death, possibly from strangers, possibly from the authorities, possibly from your own family.

*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves.*

*I have not come to bring peace [to the earth], but a sword.*

*You will be hated by all because of my name.*

Is it any wonder, then, that the Church prefers to parade around inside than to march out into mission?

Today's gospel, today's good news, is that being a follower of Christ is not entirely miserable. Mostly, perhaps, but not entirely.

At the end of the long and horrible litany of what to expect is a welcome, a cup of cold water, a small and memorable corner of grace.

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me*, says Jesus, after giving us no reason to assume that anyone would ever welcome us or his good news that no one seems to want.

There is, at the end, a welcome for Jesus, for his disciples, for prophets, for righteous persons, for little ones.

This is the glaring miracle.

Jesus is the one who speaks such unfiltered truth that he will be condemned, tortured, and crucified for it.

His disciples are the ones who refuse to let his threatening words die with him.

Prophets are never welcome, certainly not at parties or parades or political functions, because they insist on speaking the truth, rudely pointing out what most people prefer to ignore.

Righteous persons make the rest of us look bad; there is nothing quite so obnoxious, annoying, and threatening as someone who is so genuinely good.

And the little ones are those we try to avoid, whoever it is that Matthew means by that phrase.

Bible scholars have different theories: new disciples eager but shallow in faith, those with issues like the physically or mentally ill, or maybe those in abject poverty.

Whoever the *little ones* are, they are the compromised and vulnerable, exactly the kind of people the sophisticated and self-concerned take pains to avoid, the kind of people we don't want our kids or our own darting eyes to see.

This cast of unwelcome characters is really the profile of the Church, the Christian community that Christ collects and sends.

The disciples are a motley marching band of misfits, rejects, castoffs and desperate cut-offs sent into the world with truth that most people would rather not face but that we dare to name good news.

Prophet or righteous person, disciple or little one, the typical member of Church is exactly the kind of person that no one would want to welcome, even with so much as a cup of cold water.

Which, after a long march, really is so much.

Which, in an arid land with one pair of dusty sandals and no refrigerators, really is so much.

Which, after a parade of rejection and mockery and misunderstanding, really is so much.

There is, at the end of the mission, a refreshing surprise of grace, and the promise of it is barely enough, but really is enough, to keep us going.

It is small but oh so significant, rare but powerful, a minority of the march that leaves an indelible and beautiful mark that makes the whole long, miserable journey worth it.

Those who offer this welcome will also receive their reward, because God sees, and God knows.

God sees it, of course, from the middle of the parade route, having marched into trouble, having taken on human skin and destiny and death, having left the safety of sanctuary to set foot into a world of violence and cynical rejection.

God knows firsthand how hard it is to parade truth and compassion into the teeth of the world, yet even Jesus--unpopular and unbearable as he was--found a bit of welcome.

And so shall we.

Keep marching.

When the world discounts or dismisses you, rejects or refuses you, questions your faith or attacks your motives, keep moving.

Keep giving the grace you cannot expect to receive, keep sharing the hope and justice and love that the society and the system have little to no capacity to accept much less to return.

Keep marching with a smile on your face and Christ's crazy song on your lips even when no one else is willing to sing along.

Keep speaking and living, breathing and being the good news Jesus has given you.

It may in fact be a long and miserable march, but there's a welcome worth it all at the end.