Pastor Jon's Return from Sabbatical on June 27/28 based on Matthew

"A Cup of Cold Water to Little Ones Could Be Many Things"

This is obviously my first sermon back from sabbatical. I am forever grateful for the time the church gave me to be fully present with my family, to tend to my mental, spiritual and physical health, and to reflect on how to be the church in the world today.

While I was away, I got to travel with family to 3 rowing regattas for my son Eli and the Badgers in Vermont, Boston, and Sacramento. I got to be fully present at both of my son's graduations… one from high school and one from college. I took time to worship in the pew with my family at various Lutheran churches in the area and in Madison, Minocqua, Manitowoc, and one catholic church in Sun City West Arizona. I went on a retreat in Arizona with a colleague, played some golf, and hiked in Sedona. I took time to read and reflect on my ministry and the future mission of the church and my personal mission. Finally, 2 Saturdays ago, I helped Eli drive out to Oakland, CA, to take his shot at a post-college rowing career with the California Rowing Club.

During sabbatical, I also worked hard on my physical health. I participated in a program called Sword Health through the ELCA Health Plan that measured my activity every day with this band and assigned me to a live physical therapist with an AI PT. I did 60 days in a row of physical exercise to strengthen my core and lower body to prevent injuries when I want to play racquetball, basketball, or pickleball to name a few. It was nice when the AI voice came on after my workout and said, "Nice job Jon, you really crushed it today. Keep up the good work!" Jeranna got jealous whenever she heard my "AI girlfriend" complimenting me.

But trust me, even those kind words from an AI voice were encouraging… like a cup of cold water mentioned in our Gospel for today. A cup of cold water could be anything that refreshes you,

quenches your thirst, builds you up, encourages you, strengthens you, or makes you feel loved and worthy.

I experienced a cup of cold water at St. Mark's Lutheran church in Neenah last weekend. We walked in a little late for church and Pastor Niveen was doing announcements. When she saw me and my family walk in, she, in her playful style stopped everything and said, "Is that Pastor Jon and his family coming to worship?" Welcome Pastor Jon. We missed you while you were away." I felt seen, loved, and fully welcomed. It was a cup of cold water to me, even though I was a little embarrassed. And then in worship, Niveen's sermon and holy communion were a cup of cold water to me. I felt energized and showered in God's grace when I left.

A cup of cold water really is a metaphor for Jesus' love, hospitality, and grace to all people. That same grace that we received in our baptism with water and the word now extends out to others. Cold water could be a visit to a lonely or sick person, a card, a phone call, an encouraging word, a cup of coffee with a friend, a thank you, or help to a neighbor. It could be literally giving a thirsty person water to drink or a hungry person food to eat. It could be volunteering your time in the church, or at a non-prophet, or shelter. It could be speaking up for justice or standing up for someone being bullied in school or at work. When someone gives you a cup of cold water or you give someone a cup of cold water, Jesus promises to be present in that exchange. When some welcomes you, Jesus says they welcome me, and not only that, but the one who sent me.

All the people here at Our Savior's, the staff and volunteers, clergy, worshippers, too many to name, who gave their time and talents to the church during the sabbatical were a cup of cold water to me and my family. Thank you.

All this talk of a cup of water to little ones I think is a test of our discipleship, like a final exam. Not that we work our way into God's love and grace… we know that is a free gift… but our giving a cup of cold water to little ones is a response to the Gospel… to the good news

of Jesus. It ought to flow out of us naturally as disciples of Jesus. Like a final exam, when you know the material, study hard, and ace the test, that means, you got it down, and can regurgitate it. Us offering cold water… hospitality and welcome, or recognizing when someone offers that to us, is Jesus' presence.

So, as we approach the summer season in the church, the green season, the growing season, also known as the season after Pentecost, it's all about discipleship. It is about deepening your discipleship as followers of Jesus. Today's lesson clearly teaches a lesson of hospitality and welcome, not just to people we know, but to strangers, visitors, and a people Matthew calls little ones.

A little one could mean a child. But really, it could mean the most vulnerable around us. We oftentimes are the little ones ourselves. Who here is not hurting in some way? It could be us who are aging, or have medical issues, the sick, those who lost loved ones, people who are homeless or forced to move, those struggling with their mental health or spiritual health, those who are estranged from family. It could be those dealing with war in other parts of the world. We all could use a cup of cold water. Just letting someone know you see them and recognize that they too are a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, is cold water to them. What would cold water be to you this day?

Finally, ponder this, Jesus is present in the world today through the community of his followers. And since Jesus is God in human flesh, the presence of God is visible through the work of you and me in a simple act of giving a cup of cold water to little ones.

So, for fun, I am handing out bottles of water after church as a reminder that you are a cup of cold water to others. As people washed in the waters of baptism, we are to offer the thirst-quenching water of Jesus' love to others. Heck, we could even rename the church for the day to "Cold Water Lutheran Church." Come on in and be refreshed. Amen