Finding Dory is the sequel to the 2003 animated hit Finding Nemo,
in which Marlin, a single-dad clownfish,
searches the ocean for his only clownfish son, Nemo.

(Now children all over the world know clownfish)

In the sequel we follow their friend Dory, a blue tang with short-term memory loss,
on a similar adventure to find her parents.

Throughout both movies, one of Dory’s most charming qualities
is her ability to roll with the punches and forgive nearly any slight with ease.

Numerous jokes are made at her expense but she doesn’t often seem to mind
mostly because she doesn’t remember them.

A trait which makes having an inability to make short-term memories
seem rather appealing for certain occasions.

I suspect there are people in call centers and customer service desks
all over the world who wouldn’t mind having such an affliction for a day.

As the movie progresses, we are given flashbacks from Dory’s years as a young blue tang,
living in a California research and rehabilitation aquarium with her parents.

We learn that Dory has always had this short term memory problem
and that at a very young age her worried parents taught her to find her way
back to their home by building and following paths made of sea shells.

“Follow the shells.” They tell her. And follow the shells she does.
If we are honest, most of us have qualities and traits that make life more complicated for us than it is for others with different qualities and traits.

Dory is blessed by parents who kindly and compassionately help her to build a life that fits her unique qualities and traits.

In today’s scripture text, Jesus teaches his disciples,

‘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 welcomes 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.’

Here, Jesus is still giving the disciples a debriefing lesson after they have been out traveling the region searching after the lost sheep of Israel, spreading the good news that the kin-dom of God has come near, as they cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

It is likely they received a mixed reception in their travels, which may well be why Jesus tells them in the previous passage that working for the kind of peace Jesus brings is not easy and may in fact cause a lot of conflict before it brings healing and reconciliation, perhaps like the pain of cleansing a wound before real healing takes place.
I don’t know about you, but I don’t always welcome conflict.

I don’t always welcome in confrontation either,

even when I think it will be best for the long run.

And while it makes my heart smile to see welcoming signs

spring up in people’s yards across Elgin that say

“No matter where you’re from we’re glad you’re our neighbor”

and other signs with similar hopeful messages,

I also know that differences

--and we were all created differently from each other--

differences can be a source of conflict and disappointment

even among the most loving and well-meaning

neighbors, friends, and relatives.

Jesus gives three examples of welcome here: prophets, the righteous, and little ones.

It’s a rhetorical device

--a rhetorical device: a way of using words to set-up a certain feeling or expectation.

In this case, it hinges on the series of three.

First he speaks of the prophets, held in high esteem,

ones you may feel privileged to welcome.

Then he speaks of the righteous,

remember Jesus earthly father Joseph in the book of Matthew

was said to be “a righteous man.”

These are well-respected and honorable, Torah-abiding Jews

who most of his listeners would deem highly deserving of welcome.

By now Jesus’ hearers may be listening for someone else

equally worthy of dignity and respect.

Instead, Jesus names the “little ones.”
We may think of children when we those words and that may be right
   but the Greek can also be translated into “the least of these”
   and should be understood as someone with little honor or respect in that culture.

“Whoever gives even a cup of cold water,” Jesus says,
   “to one of these little ones--the least of these--
   in the name of a disciple,
   --or as it may be more aptly translated, because the giver is a disciple,
   --truly I tell you,
   none of these will lose their reward.

It’s a surprising third choice.
   Who is deserving of welcome?
   A prophet, the righteous, the least of these.

In other words, those with honor and those without
   are all deserving of welcome, and a cup of cold water.

I think about the Soup Kettle here at our church.
   And the cups of cold water and warm meals that are handed out.
I think about the reward for the giver of just being able to give.
I think too about more challenging examples, like the Black woman who defended a Klu Klux Klan
member as group of angry counter protesters returned his harmful and hateful words with their
own violence.
   She was a young college student.
   She shielded him from the blows of the crowd with her own body
   not because she thought the KKK guy was right but because she said,
   the violence made those who perpetrated it not any better than the Klan.
   And, every human life is valuable.
“Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones --the least of these--

in the name of a disciple,

--truly I tell you,

none of these will lose their reward.”

Have you ever received a cup of cold water?

--Maybe it was an actual cup of cold water on a hot day

or maybe another form of unexpected or undeserved kindness.

It can be a humbling and moving experience.

Like when my in-laws loaned us money

when we moved to Iowa

--a good amount of money!

When we tried to write the check to give it back

they told us to keep it.

Like the time I was stuck on the runway in an airplane

with a less-than-two-year-old

and the flight attendants kept bringing us actual

cups of cold water and apple juice

and plastic cups they made into goofy hats.

And our seat neighbors played hide-and-seek over the head rests

and turned something interminable

into an experience of grace and mercy.

It’s sort of like when someone else washes your feet at love feast,

which can be so humbling and for some even uncomfortable.

Sometimes it’s hard to let others help us.

It makes us vulnerable.
And if we have to ask for help, well that’s even worse, because we could be told no.

Perhaps it should be no wonder that those who must rely on others for their every need can at least sometimes grow weary and cranky.

The text says, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.”

This welcome word used over and over again, can also mean accepts or receives.

Sometimes we are the ones who may or may not do the accepting and receiving.

And sometimes we are the ones who may or may not be accepted or received.

Eugene Peterson translates it this way in the Message version:

“Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God’s messenger. Accepting someone’s help is as good as giving someone help.”

Both can be hard.

I think accepting someone’s help though can be harder, especially if we have a hard time accepting ourselves.

Listen, we are all messed up.

But God still loves us.
Some days I think the Bible could be summed up in those two sentences.

I mean if you want a story of someone at least as messed up as you
but who God still loves,

I can find you one in pretty much any book of the Bible.

I think it’s hard though for many of us to accept that... acceptance.

We don’t need to be perfect people

with perfect bodies, or perfect hearts,

or perfect driving records

or a perfect church

or a perfect family

for God to welcome, accept, receive, and love us anyway.

This is the cup of cold water I think Jesus so wants his disciples to receive. //

Read the text again with acceptance of ourselves in mind.

“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me,

and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Whoever welcomes you. Can you welcome you?

Accept and receive you?

With all your warts, quirky traits,

mistakes?

Can you welcome you?

Because it says, if you do, you welcome Jesus,

and the one, the Holy One, who sent him.

I don’t think that means

we need to keep making the same mistakes over and over

or stop improving or healing or working for peace.
No, I just think it means,

we cannot even begin

to fully experience the healing and wholeness

of the presence of Christ

until we become aware

and accept, welcome, and receive ourselves

just as we are.

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At the end of Finding Dory,

our heroine is lost in the open ocean outside the

Marine Animal Institute

where she not only lost the trail of her missing parents

but also became separated from Marlin and Nemo.

Lost and distraught,

she decides to accept her own quirky faults and talents.

By asking herself, “what would Dory do?”

she is led first to a stand of Kelp

then squishy sand,

then a sea shell

and another sea shell

and another sea shell

line up one after another after another.

“Follow the shells,” she whispers.

She follows the shells to a sunken tire,
which is studded by other paths of seashells
spreading out like spokes on a giant wheel
    into the far wide ocean.

Her parents have stayed in that one spot for years,
ever giving up hope that they would find their lost daughter,
    lining up seashell after seashell after seashell one at a time
    until that day when she arrived
    and they dropped their fins-ful of shells
to gather her into an animated blue tang
    homecoming embrace.

One little seashell at a time
they laid the path that brought her home.
One little sea shell at a time.

There are no small gestures of welcome, acceptance, or mercy.

Even though you may feel helpless beside
    the bed of a suffering loved one.
    Showing up is no small gesture.

    Sending a card on a birthday is no small gesture.

    Smiling at someone on the sidewalk is no small gesture.

    Teaching Sunday School is no small gesture.

    Putting a banner on the side of your church
    is no small gesture.
Taking a meal to a new parent is no small gesture.

Playing the piano is no small gesture.

Offering a ride or an umbrella in the rain is no small gesture.

Writing a letter on behalf of someone else is no small gesture.

Putting out a rainbow bench is no small gesture.

Holding a hand when crossing a street is no small gesture.

Saying hello to a new person is no small gesture.

Washing feet is no small gesture.

A cup of cold water is no small gesture.

Giving and receiving acts of welcome, kindness, acceptance, and love,
even as simple as a cup of cold water,
Jesus teaches,
is welcoming the Holy One
who is eternal and abiding love itself
in whom we find eternal healing, peace, and wholeness.

May we drink deeply of that reward
in this life and in the life to come.

May it be so. Amen.