Grace and Peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The disciples were sent out and warned and were told about the persecutions and who to fear and now Jesus tells the about the rewards. Those who welcome them will receive a reward. The rule of Saint Benedictine states, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” In this Benedictine practice, the community that welcomes is blessed by the guest and the guest in turn is blessed, receiving care and hospitality.

The little ones Jesus is talking about also means the disciples. This highlights the vulnerability and danger of being part of this minority alternative, countercultural group that challenges the Roman imperial power but none will lose their reward. The same is true for us today.

The mention of giving a cup of cold water to the little ones, which includes us, reminds me of a story that appeared in Guideposts.

In the early 1930s, after graduation and working in a drug store for 2 years Ted Hustead and his wife Dorothy bought the only drugstore in a small town on the edge of the South Dakota Badlands with the $3,000 legacy left to Ted by his father. They chose this store because they wanted to be in a small town and there here was a Catholic church in town and they could go to mass daily. When they talked to the priest, the doctor and the banker, they all told us that this town was a good place with good people and that they wanted them to come live there. Dorothy and Ted were excited about this small town, but when they got back home and told their families about the plan, they found them skeptical. "That town is in the middle of nowhere," a cousin said, "and furthermore, everybody there is flat broke busted." My father-in-law was understanding, but even he said, "You know, it is just about as Godforsaken as you can get."

They'd been open only a few days, and realized how business had been bad in this little prairie town of only 326 people, 326 poor people. Most of them were farmers who'd been wiped out either by the Depression or drought.

Looking out on a cold night Ted could see a Tin Lizzie chugging along the two-laner. Suitcases were strapped to the running boards. Someone's going home for the holidays, he thought to himself. I wished they would stop, just for a cup of coffee, but they didn't. Here on Main Street, no one was out. When Ted went back inside, he turned the light off over the soda fountain and joined Dorothy and our four-year-old son Billy in their "apartment", a room they'd made by stretching a blanket across the back of the store.

The first few months went by and business didn't improve. "I don't mind being poor, " Dorothy said to Ted. "But I wonder if we can use our talents to their fullest here." When Dorothy spoke of talents, Ted’s heart sank. She had a teaching degree and had taught literature in a Sioux Falls high school. Ted wondered if he was being fair, making her work in this prairie drugstore?

But the next minute Dorothy said, "We shouldn't get down, Ted. I'm sure we can use our abilities fully here. We can make this place work!" Dorothy's optimism lifted him. He said to her, "Five years, Dorothy, that's what I think we should give to this store. Five good years, and if it doesn't work by then, we will. .." Dorothy said "Don't worry about then. We'll make it go. And just think, Ted, pretty soon that monument at Mount Rushmore will be done, and then there will be an endless stream of people going by. I'm sure they'll visit us!"

They weren't starving and they’d begun to make good friends there. Their pastor, Father John Connolly, had become a tower of strength, helping them keep their faith strong. And they had worked hard to serve our neighbors well. Filling prescriptions for a sick child or an ailing farmer made them feel that they were doing something good. Ted also studied some veterinary medicine on my own so that he could help out farmers when their stock was ill.

But all of this didn't seem to be enough. Ted still spent too many hours looking out the store window for customers who never showed up. He felt he was wasting too much of his life watching people pass by. Maybe, as Dorothy's father had said, this was Godforsaken.

By the time the summer came around after 5 years, their business hadn't grown much at all. Their five-year trial would be up in December. What would they do then? Along with nine-year-old Billy, Dorothy and Ted now have a one-month-old daughter, Mary Elizabeth. Ted wondered what hardships was in in store for them.

One hot Sunday in July, though, a great change swept them up. It started quietly, in the deadening heat of an early afternoon, when Dorothy said to Ted, "You don't need me here, Ted. I'm going to put Billy and the baby down for a nap and maybe take one myself." Ted minded the empty store and swatted flies with a rolled-up newspaper. Ted stood in the door, and no matter where Ted looked, there was no shade, because the sun was so high and fierce. An hour later Dorothy came back. “Too hot to sleep?" I asked.” No, it wasn't the heat that kept me awake," Dorothy said. "It was all the cars going by on Route 16A. The jalopies just about shook the house to pieces. "That's too bad," I said. "No, because you know what, Ted? I think I finally saw how we can get all those travelers to come to our store." "And how's that?" he asked.

"Well, now what is it that those travelers really want after driving across that hot prairie? They're thirsty. They want water. Ice cold water! Now we've got plenty of ice and water. Why don't we put up signs on the highway telling people to come here for free ice water? Listen, I even made up a few lines for the sign:

"Get a soda . . . Get a root beer . . . turn next corner . . . Just as near . . . To Highway 16 & 14. . . Free Ice Water. . . The name of the drug store"

They modeled them after the old Burma Shave highway so the people could read them as they drove.

Ted and a high schooler went out to the highway and put up signs for free ice water and when they got back to the store, people had already begun showing up for their ice water. For hours they poured gallons of ice water, made ice cream cones and gave highway directions. When the travelers started on their way again, refreshed and ready for new adventures, they gave us hearty thanks. When the day was done they were pooped. They sat in front of the store, watching the sun set, feeling a cool breeze come in off the prairie. In the summer twilight, the small town looked radiant. It looked like a good place to call home. The rest is history. Wall Drug draws up to twenty thousand people to eat or still get a glass of cold water for free on a good summer day. As the Gospel of Matthew proclaims welcome and the gift of a cold cup of water to little ones, the story of Wall Drug in western South Dakota serves as an example.

Ted’s greatest lesson was there's absolutely no place on God's earth that's Godforsaken. No matter where you live, you can succeed, because wherever you are, you can reach out to other people with something that they need!

The same is true today for our congregation. We need to constantly think about ways to reach out to people with something they need. From our baptism we are sent into the world to tell and embody the good news of Jesus Christ. All are sent to bear Christ to others with humility and vulnerability, and as we heard Jesus say, being willing to risk rejection. What would happen if we stopped expecting people to come on their own initiative through our church doors, and instead took seriously our calling to bring the gospel to them? What would happen if we truly believed that we bear the presence of Christ to every person we encounter, in every home, workplace, or neighborhood we enter? What would happen if we saw every conversation as an opportunity to speak words of grace, every interaction as an opportunity to embody Christ’s love for the neighbor?

Go and engage in the name of Christ. Amen.