

**WATERBOYS**  
Matthew 10:40-42

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on June 29, 2008, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

*‘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.’*

I want to share an email exchange I had this week with one of our youth.

I’m working on Sunday’s sermon [I wrote], and I’ve got a sports question.

When I played football in high school, eons ago, the only thing we had in terms of help on the sidelines were “waterboys.” They would sprint out to the huddle during a time out and bring the players water.

There are a lot more sports now [I continued], and girls as well serving in this role, so what I am after is what names are used to describe people who serve this function in other sports, like soccer and lacrosse.

Also, when the “waterboys” are girls, what are they called? Is “waterboy” a term still in use, or has something replaced it?

The answer came back:

Probably less has changed in the years since you played than you might assume. The term “waterboy” still applies to an extent. In reality now team MANAGERS carry out what you would call the waterboy’s duties so I would go with that with TRAINER being another option. The managers generally take stats, help with water and are utility people doing what the team needs them to do in the peripheral of the team.

Sounds like a great speech! Hopefully I will make it to church Sunday to hear it.

By the time I had written my initial email, the breath of the bulletin deadline was breathing on me, so I settled on the title “Waterboys” and put it on the marquis.

The truth is I was relieved to learn not everything has changed since I ended my unremarkable football career.

- “Waterboys.”
- “Managers.”
- “Trainers.”

They are still around, in every sport, supporting the players who play the game, score the points, sustain the injuries, and receive the adulation of the crowd and the best dates to the prom. There is not much glamour in being a waterboy, but that is what most of us feel like most of the time for most of our lives. We support others who carry out the *real* action, play the *real* game.

## I.

At the conclusion of the second of five blocks of teaching in Matthew – the others being the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>1</sup> the parables,<sup>2</sup> teachings about forgiveness,<sup>3</sup> and teachings about his death, resurrection, and return<sup>4</sup> – Jesus commissions those who go out in his name:

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me [he says], 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.*

*Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.*

Jesus then concludes this block of teaching with his own image of waterboys:

*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.*

When we hear Jesus speak of “little ones,” the image that comes to our mind is children:

*Suffer the little children to come to me<sup>5</sup> [he says]; and unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>6</sup>*

While normally in the New Testament “little ones” refers to children, in our passage, Jesus uses the phrase to refer to all who carry forward his work in the world.

*...whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...will [not] lose their reward.*

Thus, he is saying that whoever serves as “waterboy” to the disciples will be rewarded.

## II.

Many of us probably feel that “waterboy” is an accurate description of our role in matters Christian. My hunch is that most of us feel all we have to offer is a little bit of support for the more committed and noble people who do the more lasting work of God in the world – the St. Francis of Assisi's, the Mother Teresa's, the Martin Luther King's.

For example, in our own church, we may appreciate, even marvel at what happens on Sunday morning: the music, the liturgy, the sense of energy and camaraderie in the congregation. And we probably feel that we contribute in only a supportive role: handing out bulletins, counting money after the service, perhaps reading scripture or singing in the choir, but certainly not a solo. We are comfortable and indeed honored to serve as waterboys, but make no bones about it, waterboys are what we are.

We may marvel at what our church does across the world in Kenya, organizing congregations, training theological students, most of all taking children of AIDS and providing them with a home and a school to escort them into a healthy and safe adulthood. We may feel that what we contribute is merely supportive, perhaps through prayer, perhaps through contributing money for school supplies or sponsoring a child or a teacher for a year. We may even be among the twenty or so from Westminster who have visited Moi's Bridge. At whatever level we are involved, we more than likely feel as though we are a waterboy, running onto the field with Gatorade, supporting those in Kenya who do the *real* work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:14.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 18:3.

We may revel at seeing children come to the chancel every Sunday, and rejoice at worshipping in a congregation where not everyone is headed toward their retirement years, at least immediately. We probably feel that all we can contribute to children is a smile in worship, help with a coat, possibly even signing up to tell them a story in Creation Station. We are honored to be waterboys for their teachers and parents, and let it go at that.

## II.

But there is an interesting twist to this role we assume we play and to this whole image of “waterboy” as it appears in the Bible. Follow me along for a minute.

In our passage, the phrase “in the name of” actually means “*because one is.*”<sup>7</sup> Thus, a clearer reading of Jesus’ words commissioning his disciples goes something like this:

Whoever welcomes a prophet *because one is* a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.

Whoever welcomes a righteous person *because one is* a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.

And, for the waterboy:

Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones – to these disciples – *because one is* a disciple—will [not] lose their reward.

In these sayings, contrary to the way we feel about ourselves,

- the one who supports a prophet *is* a prophet
- the one who supports a righteous person *is* a righteous person
- the one who serves as waterboy to a disciple *is* in fact a disciple as well.

In the new community Jesus inaugurates and commissions in this section of teaching in Matthew, there is no real distinction between supportive service and front line service, between being a waterboy and being one to whom water is brought for support and relief and energy for service.

\*\*

This unusual meshing of roles often occurs in God’s dealings with his people.

In the earliest days of the people of Israel, when the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, the Egyptians began to fear a population explosion among the Hebrew slaves. So the king ordered their midwives – the Egyptian women who assisted Hebrew women at birth – to eliminate every Hebrew infant boy as soon as he was delivered.

But two Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, had come to revere the God of the Hebrew women whose babies they had delivered. These two refused to carry out the king’s gruesome order. They lied to the king, these midwives, saying that the Hebrew women were so strong they gave birth before the midwives arrived.

The king responded with a second order to throw all infant boys into the Nile.<sup>8</sup> When that order was carried out, one baby boy was rescued from the Nile by the king’s own daughter.<sup>9</sup> That rescu-ee grew up to lead the Hebrews out of slavery and to the edge of the Promised Land.<sup>10</sup> His name was Moses, which means “to draw out.”<sup>11</sup>

The point is this: Had the Egyptian midwives not stood up to the king, the Hebrew people would have been eliminated and God’s promise of land, nationhood, and blessing would not have been fulfilled. Viewed from one perspective, the

---

<sup>7</sup> Boring....

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 1:8-22.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 2:1-10.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 3:1-12.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 2:10.

midwives, like waterboys, were simply playing a supportive role – in fact, their title implies that; but viewed from another perspective, they are direct participants in the fulfillment of God’s promise to deliver those long held in captivity.

\*\*

A few hundred years later, after the Hebrews have entered the land, they are again threatened with extinction: this time by Philistine troops.

The Philistines have in their arsenal a particular weapon – a giant named Goliath of Gath. When Goliath roars and threatens the Hebrews with certain extinction, the troops serving on the front line quake.

No one steps forward to take on Goliath.

But one young Hebrew, carrying water to his older brothers serving on the front line, steps forward, and in the time it takes three smooth stones to be shot from a sling, Goliath is vanquished, and the promise of God continues.<sup>12</sup> The waterboy’s name is David, soon to be king.

Among God’s people, waterboys and midwives do not merely deliver water to those on the front line or assist with births until the OBGYN’s arrive; rather, they stay in the game, catch passes, makes tackles, complete a full delivery. In the realm of God, there is no real distinction between waterboys and players, even between midwives and mothers. Those who think they are simply being supportive soon find themselves on the front lines. Among the people of God, waterboys and those who receive their water are virtually one and the same.

### III.

The email writer said to me: “Probably less has changed in the years since you played than you might assume.”

What hasn’t changed is this:

- If we hang around places where waterboys are slaying giants and midwives are disobeying kings,
- if we hang around people through whom God seems to be doing something out of the ordinary, something radical and threatening and yet at the same time bold and beautiful,

then sooner or later we begin to realize that we are doing a lot more than simply carrying water to people we think are the *real* saints and heroes.

- We’ll soon find ourselves picking up a stone, reaching for a sling shot, placing a newborn in a carefully constructed basket on the river.
- We’ll find ourselves standing up to giants and kings, and to our surprise, prevailing.

Welcome to the trade association of waterboys and midwives. It is a deceptively powerful association, often operating behind the scenes, yet through our membership, we will do far more good than we think or imagine.

Amen.

---

<sup>12</sup> I Samuel 17:1-58.