

Pentecost 5, 2023-July 2, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 10:40-42

"A Gospel Reward" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Rewards. We shouldn't need to hear a sermon to understand how rewards work. We have plenty of examples in our lives when we have received rewards. You do something and then you get something proportionately rewarding in return. Rewards put us in the driver seat. We can honestly say we like getting what we deserve and can usually accept it if we don't get a reward if we know the rules and why we didn't get the recognition we tried to achieve. We usually like rewards and fairness they attempt to deliver. But Jesus reminds us today of a different kind of reward compared to the rewards we are used to receiving. The rewards we are used to receiving follow guidelines and rules and these rewards can be seen and held in our hands. These rewards even last... for a while anyway. However, when I was going to bring one of the recognitions I have received from different organizations and boards that I have served on, I wasn't able to locate even one. The rewards Jesus speaks about, a prophet's reward, or a righteous person's reward, or we can call them gospel rewards follow no rules. They are hard to see or put our hands on, but they are more certain and longer lasting than any reward you can earn in this life.

There have been plenty of rewards handed out this past week in our community. Many of the busy schedules of spring and summer baseball and softball programs for kids of all ages have now ended and they culminate with the presentation of different awards. Some of these awards are given based on the outcome of tournaments with double eliminations and winning and losing brackets that are too difficult for me to try and understand. But coaches and parents seem to know what games must be won to win higher honors. Kids that are completing swimming lessons only move to the next level if they have mastered the skills that they need to advance. If you don't do the work, you don't get the reward. Even though winning and losing is not the focus in t-ball, you don't get to have the reward of a water party at the end of the season if you didn't at least participate. Yes, there are often awards handed out simply for participation.

I get rewards from some of the places that I frequently do business with. I get points when I buy fuel for my pickup. People are sometimes kind enough to me and remind me when I have rewards coming to me even when I have forgotten, like when I go to Ace Hardware and they remind me of the rewards that are due. I haven't done what is most likely easy work to set up a Casey's rewards account so when I stop there and am asked for my Casey's rewards, I must apologize for not having a Casey's rewards and because of the rules, I will never get a free donut. I don't know how many times I have put my name in the large glass bowl on the counter at the Someday Cafe for their weekly free meal reward drawing, but no matter how often I have supported this place, not once have they pulled my name out and called to reward me. I am thankful that they too have set up a rewards program based on my purchases rather than my luck. Now that I am back in control, my odds of winning are back in my control and in my favor again.

The words on the front of the bulletin and the words from the version of Matthew printed in your bulletin are not the same. All too often, when the first words you hear in this gospel reading are like on the front of your bulletin "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me" sounds like for you to receive a heavenly reward, you must be welcoming. You need to strive to welcome all people into your church and welcome what they believe Jesus thought your church should stand for. It may be from this very passage that most congregations have teams to serve goodies and coffee on Sunday morning. Some churches have plastic bottles of water made that have the name of their church printed on them so they can be handed them out to visitors to their church or in parades so that they can feel like they have earned a reward (as suggested in this gospel reading) by giving a cup of cold water to children.

But Jesus doesn't tell us that to receive a reward, we must be welcoming to others, even though this is what we should do. In these verses, Jesus is still talking to his disciples that he is sending out to proclaim the gospel to the world. Jesus is telling his disciples that those who welcome or better yet, receive them will be receiving Jesus and if they receive Jesus, they will also be receiving God who sent Jesus into this world. Receiving Jesus' disciples means that people will listen to what his disciples have to say in the name of Jesus and by doing so they will receive the prophet's reward. This reward is not a certificate of achievement. This reward is not a gift that is up to the listener to decide if they are going to keep or reject. After hearing how a prophet usually is rewarded will leave most people wanting to pass on receiving this kind of reward.

The receiving of the reward of a prophet's first intention is never to make you feel good, like a first-place trophy you have been working hard to win. Just before Jesus sent out his disciples, he also told them that they would also suffer for his sake. These disciples were never going to get their names pulled out of the glass bowl for a free meal at the Capernaum Cafe, no matter how many times they entered. But these disciples were not only given this warning about suffering, but they were given a promise of a reward that was impossible to be taken away from them. They were promised that Jesus would never let anyone take away their reward of eternal life, no matter what others would say or do to them.

You might think that there could easily be a second volume of the bible that would tell of the success stories of the ministry of the 12 apostles that Jesus sent out into the world. They were each given the same authority to do whatever Jesus was given to do. You might think there would be a supplement to the bible with 12 chapters, one for each of the disciples describing each of the success stories of their ministries. However, Jesus reminds us today that none of the work they did was their work. Any work they did was the work of Jesus.

In the past weeks, I have seen Jesus received and welcomed by people who know me well and by people who have never met me before. This past week, I was welcomed by a family who needed to hear from Jesus and his love for children after they had given birth to their third child who lived only 20 hours. They didn't care who I was as long as I was sent by Jesus with his word of hope and resurrection which is the gospel's reward. The gospel reward is welcomed by people who may be hearing what God has done for them for the very first time and it is welcomed by those who have heard it all of their lives. And when we have been filled with this gospel message it can do nothing else but overflow from you and you will be able to see the needs of others and serve them with the blessings you are able to share even if it is just a cup of cold water. Amen