

Sermon Proper 8A July 2, 2023

Fr. Nick Smith

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalms 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Do you ever spend time thinking about the ‘rewards’ you might be storing up for yourself in heaven? Today we have finished up our readings from Chapter 10 of Matthew’s Gospel, and Jesus has been referring to the rewards one can expect for doing the right thing. He has instructing his disciples how to do the ministries of the kingdom of God, how to do the work he himself has been doing all around the countryside, and he has frequently dangled this carrot in front of them. This carrot of the rewards they can expect. Two weeks ago, we heard how Jesus told them to go out into the villages with no extra provisions, to live off the land, not to worry about where their next meal is coming from, and to be essentially homeless like he himself has been. But that during this time of personal deprivation, they should use his authority to heal the sick, cast out those pesky demons, and proclaim from the rooftops that the kingdom of God has come near. And for this they would earn a reward. Then last week, also reading from Chapter 10, Jesus warned the disciples that they would face real difficulties as they carried out his mission. They would be harassed and persecuted. Their families might turn against them, and the civic and religious authorities might mark them for imprisonment or even death. Yet, if they stayed the course, they would be earning their rewards. Now today, as we complete the chapter, and Jesus continues to dangle that carrot, we hear that rewards are not only available to the disciples who are doing the work of teaching, but also to those who learn from them and welcome them. The recipients of the work are due a reward as well!

Now, there is a secret that only Gale and I know, and I’m going to share it with you and ask you to keep it under your hats. And I’ll tell you this story so you’ll understand. This past week, while we were in DC, Gale and I went to visit my cousin who is in a convalescent nursing home with some memory problems, and took my daughter Olivia and her 4-year-old son Wesley with us. We have tried to visit this cousin a couple of times a year when we are traveling down that way. He is 17 years older than I, and is a retired military officer. I have always been fond of him, and he has shown me many kindnesses over the years. The facility where he now resides is in Williamsburg Virginia, and is called Patriots’ Colony. But the trip there from DC is a good three hours each way, and the driving through that congested route is not especially fun. And when we get there, we visit for less than a half hour. So, six hours on the road for such a short visit might seem inefficient and a questionable use of our time, but Gale and I never seem to count the cost; it just seems worth it, and we just look at each other and say “let’s go.” So, as we were leaving Williamsburg last week for the tedious drive back to DC, we turned to each other and laughed..”Well, we’ll get our reward in heaven!” My daughter overheard us, and said “What?! I never heard you say that before.” And we told her our secret: We often say that to each other and chuckle when we have gone out of our way to do what we think is a good thing. ‘We’ll get our reward in heaven.’ It’s kind of a joke, since we don’t really believe that anyone is keeping score, but it is a chance for us to share a smile and recognize that, as husband and wife and best friends, we are on the same page.

Fact is, we are deeply grateful for any opportunity to participate in doing God's 'good things'. I think that may be one of the major reasons we were first attracted to each other. So, that's certainly a reward. You may notice in this reading that Jesus thinks of himself and us as ambassadors: "Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." If we accept the role of disciples who carry out his ministries, we are ambassadors of the Father, too, like him. We might be prophets, ones who speak God's truth, he goes on, or we might be righteous ones, or we might be ones who offer a cool drink of water to the vulnerable. When we share in the mission, we represent God, and it is an honor and a privilege. It might be dangerous, it might be tiring, it might be humiliating, it might seem foolish to some, but it is a task Jesus sends the disciples out to do. It is a task Jesus sends the church out to do. There is, of course, more to being the church than just worshiping in a comfortable setting; there is the healing, the feeding, and the proclaiming, and disciples are called and sent to be ambassadors and to do such things. And what about our reward??

Well, there is another dynamic in what Jesus is telling the disciples here in chapter 10. Several times he repeats the word 'welcomes'. If an ambassador is welcomed, then the one who sends the representative is also welcomed. And those who welcome also receive the reward. 'Whoever welcomes the prophet in the name of a prophet (the prophet who sent the 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.' So, it's not just the ambassador who will be rewarded for his work, but also the one who sincerely welcomes such an emissary. So the rewards spread and are shared among all who participate...those who minister and those who are being ministered to. It's not just the one who pours the water, but also the one who offers the cup and the one who drinks from the cup who will experience the reward. Everyone involved wins. Everyone involved in this good and holy work benefits from the combined and shared experience. And that is, in itself, the reward. The relationships, the opportunities, the growth, the forgiveness, the common joy, peace, and love, that is the reward. And while Gale and I chuckle to each other that we will someday receive our reward in heaven, we know that the real compensation for extending our love to others is right there in front of us all the time.

That cup of cold water might be a cup of kindness, or a cup of forgiveness, or a cup of encouragement, or a cup of peace shared among strangers, but in any case, it brings rewards. Perhaps we should think of the rewards, the carrots that Jesus is dangling before us, as gifts, or blessings. If we pass along any such cup, perhaps we should specify our intent by asking God to bless it, to use it for the good of the kingdom. The rewards, or blessings, we hope to spread are not merit points we have banked away for our pleasure in some future heaven, but everyday results of our ministry in the name the God who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. The rewards of relationship are to be enjoyed in God's kingdom as it comes to earth. This is the holy work of the church. This is the rewarding sacramental life we have been called to live and enjoy without counting the cost. Amen.