

## 1 Sermon, August 4, 2013

Texts: Philippians 4:10-20, Matthew 6:1-6

Title: "The Rewards of Christian Faith: Accepted, supported by Community"

1. Do you think about rewards when you think about faith?
2. Smug proudly righteous have received their reward
3. Another reward – what is it?
4. The Kingdom of God
5. Christian Community
6. Communion today

### 1. Do you think about rewards when you think about faith?

When you think of faith, do you think of rewards?

When I think of rewards, I think of dog training.

When I think of faith, I think of it as something to be done because we were made to glorify God, not to earn a reward.

In fact, Jesus told us not to lend money in order to receive interest. We are instead to lend not expecting a reward.

### 2. Smug proudly righteous have received their reward

So it's kind of odd when Jesus talks about rewards in today's passage from Matthew.

In fact, there's something ominous when Jesus says: "They have received *their* reward." No inflection in the Bible, however.

Those who have received their reward are those who:

- a. give ostentatiously with trumpet fanfare
- b. pray like a hypocrite to be noted for your religiosity or ability to speak
- c. fast and make a show of it (verses 16-18)

These have received their reward.

Who today would you say that Jesus would say have received their reward?

The story goes that a judge, a bishop, and a politician were having a discussion. All three were rather vain men, and their talk soon turned to the question of which of them was the greatest.

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"Well," (deep voice) said the judge, "my position is one of dignity and power. When I walk into the courtroom, the bailiff says 'All rise!' and all the people stand to pay me honor."

"That's very nice," (haughty) said the bishop. "People stand in your honor; but when people have an audience with me they kneel, kiss my ring, and they address me as 'Your Holiness.'"

The politician snorted and said, (nasal) "I think I got you both beat; every time I run for office and make promises on the podium, the people look down, put their hands over their eyes, and say 'Oh, my God!'"

I think Jesus would say that these self-satisfied people have received their reward.

Or there's the story of the pretty woman who went to the priest for confession and shared that her conscience was bothering her. She was afraid that she was vain. She added that on this very morning she had gazed into her mirror and had yielded to the temptation of thinking herself beautiful.

"Is that all, my daughter?" the priest demanded. "Then, my daughter," the priest said, "go in peace, for to be mistaken is not a sin."

Jesus criticizes those who are hypocrites, who get something out of the public display of their faith. Making public displays of faith has its rewards. What would those be?

Recognition

Self-satisfaction

Perhaps the best seats at the concert or stadium

Perhaps people treating you with reverence

## 3. Another reward – what is it?

What we 21<sup>st</sup> century people don't realize is that what Jesus was saying was radical or even revolutionary.

Piety or religiousness was, in the ancient world, seen to be a very public thing. Good Judeans went to the Temple three times per year for some very public, although personal, rituals. They bought their own lamb or pigeon and had it sacrificed. They were to give to the upkeep of the priests and the temple, and it was a very public thing what each person gave.

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In the Greek culture that surrounded Judea, piety or pietas referred to the public veneration of the gods. It was done for other people to see. Without such a display from prominent citizens, what would happen to the traditional values that were associated with the gods? Pietas was a cultural glue, holding things in place. It was the natural order of things that the wealthy, especially, would give publicly as an example and as part of their community, and in order to please the gods.

In making these actions of giving to the poor, prayer and fasting private, Jesus is suggesting a radical course. He is suggesting that there is a very different kind of reward for Christian faith, one that has nothing to do with public recognition.

And this is what I want to talk about the next few Sundays.

#### 4. The Kingdom of God

Jesus was constantly speaking of another reality called the Kingdom of God. The kingdom is a different way of living.

The rewards in the kingdom are not so public; they're kind of hidden. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is like wheat growing in a field: the farmer doesn't know how it grows.

The rewards of the Kingdom are things like the Holy Spirit working in us, a new sense of self, and eternal life. None of these is showy or flashy. But all are very real.

#### 5. Christian Community

Another reward is Christian Community. If we are part of the Kingdom of God, we're part of a community where we are accepted and loved. It's not a perfect community; it is a community of flawed human beings. The flaws, I think, make it even more beautiful.

It's hard to explain the rewards of Christian Community to someone who has not experienced it.

I can tell you that the rewards of Christian Community are more than comfort. But the Christian Community does comfort us when we are anxious or grieving.

The rewards are more than belonging — but belonging gives us a new identity and a stronger sense of self.

The rewards are more than acceptance — but acceptance is an essential part of it.

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The rewards are more than a place. But having a holy building, a holy ground sure can help a person experience what is sacred.

The rewards of Christian Community are more than a feeling, but feelings are an important part of it.

Christian Community is more than all of these put together. It is a living, breathing reality that is alive in our relationships.

When my eldest son was in seventh grade, he had a friend named Zach. Actually, friend might be too strong a word.

Samuel was one of the few kids his age that would willingly spend time with Zach. Zach got himself into trouble often because words just popped out of his mouth without thinking. He wasn't particularly athletic, or particularly good with academics.

Zach started coming to our youth group, and he just couldn't get over the fact of how different our group was from the kids at school. No one teased him. Everyone accepted him. He asked why people treated him so differently in the church.

That's Christian Community.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, wrote of Christian Community when he commented on what the people in the church at Philippi were like:

The church at Philippi had concern for him. They sent Paul money so he could do his work. They loved God. They were good and faithful people. They were Christian Community.

#### 6. Communion today

Today we celebrate Holy Communion. We remember that God accepts each and every one of us. As we share from one loaf, we remember that we are all human, all sinners in need of the love of God. We remember that we are not alone, but can rely on each other. We remember that only together can we be the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:1-6, RSV.

“I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.” Philippians 4:10-20, NRSV.