

Just Rewards

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 10:40-42

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The date was July 13th, 1977. A little picture called Star Wars was at the box office, disco was all the rage, and your pastor had just celebrated his fifth birthday. New York City was in the middle of a scorching heat wave that had sent the thermometer above 100. Everyone in this city of seven million who had one was running their air conditioning on full power and that evening an electrical storm popped up. Well, the combination of all the air conditionings running and the lightning strikes on power lines all proved to be too much for the power grid, and all of the sudden late in the evening of this historic day, the entire city saw the lights go out. On this hot July night, New York was in the middle of a black out.

Now, New York had seen a similar black out twelve years earlier in 1965, and that one was pretty peaceful. But the 1965 blackout took place in November when it was cold outside and everyone was indoors. But this event on a hot summer night when everyone was outside was anything but peaceful. By the time it was all over, more than 1500 businesses had been looted or set on fire, there were more than 3000 arrests and 132 police officers had been injured trying to do nothing more than keep the peace.

Now, why do I tell you this story today about the blackout of '77? Well, I tell you this story because I think it shows as clearly as anything can that when no one is looking, when there is not a light shining on us to show our behavior, our selfish nature comes out. When no one can see what we're doing, what will we do? Usually it isn't pretty, usually it isn't kind, usually it says "I'm going to look out for me and mine and I couldn't care less about you and yours."

Selfishness is everywhere and in the church it seems that our calling is to reject selfishness. Jesus said that whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever wants to lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will find it. If anything that sounds like a call to reject selfishness just as again and again, Jesus preached against greed, against hatred, against vengeance, against all kinds of selfish behaviors. “You cannot serve God and money” he said. “If someone strikes you on one cheek offer him the other” he said again. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He said yet again.

Well, it is because of Jesus’ words and it is because of our calling in the church to reject selfishness that today’s gospel reading may sound odd to your ears. For it is in this reading that Jesus says “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.”

What is the problem with this passage? This passage promises a reward to those who do acts of self-sacrifice, kindness and hospitality, and this promise will motivate many to do these acts who would not otherwise be motivated. Many people, in other words, will not do good and kind acts if they don’t believe they will be compensated in heaven. “But” as Donald Hubin writes, that “moral compensation comes with a cost.” It means that the reason Jesus gives us for doing acts of righteousness and goodness seems to be a selfish reason. You see, you don’t welcome a prophet so you will receive a prophet’s reward. You don’t give a little one a cup of cold water in order to get a reward. You do it because it is the right thing to do.

The problem, you see, is that if we in the church are motivated by the same selfishness that we see in others, then we cannot stand up to selfishness and preach against selfishness with any credibility. Anyone can act kindly and humanely because they want to go to heaven, just like anyone can refrain from looting and arson because they don't want to go to jail. But if that's the reason you act kindly and humanely then the moment you take away the reward it is like turning off the lights. At that moment, we become just as cruel and inhumane as everyone else.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Again and again in the gospels Jesus tells us that you will be rewarded in heaven if you are this kind of person, you will be rewarded if you do that—and I agree that the reason we should do the kinds of acts and be the kind of people that our Lord calls us to be should not be for the sake of some reward in heaven. But in my mind at least, it is one thing to say that we should not do something for the sake of being rewarded but it is another thing to say we should not be rewarded for something we do.

It is one thing to say that we should not do something for the sake of being rewarded and it is another thing to say we should not be rewarded for something we do. Now, in order to make my thinking clear about this, let me give you an example of what I mean. Let's suppose, you did something really nice for me. And I don't know what that might be, but let's just suppose that while my wife and kids are out of town you decided to I don't know, have me over for dinner.

And that dinner maybe included dessert with pie and ice cream, I don't know. Now, let's suppose you did this or something else for me, and I said well, you know I really appreciate that. Your kindness warms my heart, but you said to me "Well, you know pastor Rich the only reason I'm doing this for you is because I want you to do something even nicer for me." Well, if you were to say that to me, then I am sure I would be a little disappointed. I would rather think that the reason you wanted to do something kind for me is because you loved me, not because there was something in it for you.

But now let's suppose you did something really nice for me and I never said "Thank you" or did anything nice for you in return. Let's say that months went by and you called me up and you said "Hey Pastor Rich, do you remember that time I had you over for dinner?"

I said "Yes."

You said, "Well, I wasn't sure if you remembered or not."

I say "Oh yes, yes I remember."

You say, "Well, you know, Pastor Rich, I never got a thank you or anything."

I say "I know."

You say, "Well, pastor, you know, I can't help but find that to be a little rude."

And I say, "Well, if the only reason you had me to dinner was because you wanted my thanks, then you had me over for the wrong reasons."

If I said that, wouldn't I be missing the point? I would be missing the point because it is one thing to say that you shouldn't have done it because you wanted a reward, and it is another thing to say that you shouldn't receive a reward.

One thing we believe as Christians is that the universe is a just place. And you know what, if we are right that the universe is a just place, then far from giving us a reason to be selfish, we have what is the only possible answer to selfishness. For if the universe is not a just place, what could possibly be wrong with being as selfish as you care to be? As Christians we believe that while it may be for a time that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, in the end, the righteous will get their just reward and the wicked will get their just desserts. I love Psalm 73 when it says “my feet had almost stumbled and my steps had nearly slipped. I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek. Such are the wicked, always at ease, they increase their riches. All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. And when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I perceived their end. Truly you set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin.

The whole promise of our faith is that we live in a just universe, and if our faith is wrong, then there is no justice at all. There is none. You know, on this Fourth of July weekend, we remember that we live in a country that at least aspires to have liberty and justice for all. Now, I know that we don’t always get there. I know that the justice we have in our society is not perfect, but it is part of our values as Americans that we strive for a just society. And on this fourth of July weekend, I also know that we have a lot to be thankful for when it comes to the liberty and justice we have in this society. But God does not owe it to us to live in the kind of society we live in. There is no promise anywhere in this book that there will ever be justice on earth.

And what is our history about as Americans except for the history of the fragility, the fragileness of that justice. It is the history of how we almost didn't make it. In fact that is what our very national anthem is about. The War of 1812 was almost won by the British and this little experiment in democracy and equality and justice would have been erased from history forever. After the British had humiliated the United States by burning our capital to the ground, they mercilessly bombed Fort McHenry in the Battle of Baltimore for a full twenty five hours and when dawn came, a man named Francis Scott Key was sure that the Americans surrendered during the night unable as they were to withstand this awesome fury. But as the sun rose up over the fort at day break on September 13, 1814 it would not be the British Union Jack flying over Fort McHenry but the Star Spangled banner. We barely held on.

We are not promised justice in this world among men. Without God's justice in this world, where would we be? Without God's justice in this world, what hope would we have?

"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; 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." It is not about rewarding selfishness, it is about the only answer to selfishness. It is about the only hope we have in life and in death.