

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

When I was a little girl, my Grandmother would praise me with a special sentence when I did something kind for someone ... especially if I did it without being prompted ... and when I was a little girl I needed an inordinate amount of prompting! When I thought of it all by myself ... and then did it all by myself ... my Grandmother would smile at me and say, “Elizabeth, you’re going to get stars in your crown!”

Most of us have had the experience of being recognized or rewarded when we did something good. Many of us had Chore Charts at home ... or something similar ... and we would get a gold star when we completed our chore. If we earned enough gold stars, we would get a reward of some kind. It’s a pretty effective system. Even as adults, we are susceptible to the lure of a ‘reward.’ There are airlines that offer frequent flyer miles ... the more you fly, the greater the likelihood that you will get to fly somewhere for a reduced rate or perhaps even for free. My keychain and my handbag are littered with the identifying cards for more reward programs than I can count. The problem is, I very often have no idea how to redeem my reward.

The interesting thing about the whole reward process is that it tends to be transactional, not relational. A reward system is set up in such a way that if you do a particular, identified thing, you will get a reward. That’s a transaction. You do this and you will get that. It doesn’t have anything to do with relationship. But we know that Jesus is not into transactions any more than God is. Our relationship with Jesus is not about what God will do for us if we do what God asks of us. That’s not what relationship is all about. The relationship between us and God is that we want to be in God’s good graces. God wants our love, not just our obedience to certain things. We do what we do for God and for Jesus because we love God, not because we want God to come through for us in some tangible way.

And yet there are multiple references to ‘reward’ in the Bible, particularly in the gospel of Matthew who seems to have a theology of reward. At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”[Matt.5:11] And Jesus warns, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them;

for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” [Matt. 6:1] And “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” [Matt. 6:2] And “whenever 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.” [Matt. 6:6] In other words, what we do for the sake of our love for God is relational ... not transactional. It’s just between us and God ... and only God needs to know those things that we do because of our love for Him.

But mention of reward comes not just in the gospels ... it comes also in the Old Testament, the scripture into which Jesus was born. In the Book of Proverbs, it says, “Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm.” [Proverbs 11:17] and “The wicked earn no real gain, but those who sow righteousness get a true reward.” [Proverbs 11:18] Perhaps this business about rewards not only has something to do with our relationship with God, but also has to do with how we feel about ourselves. What happens to us when we extend ourselves in service to someone else? Do we walk away with a smile in our hearts and a good feeling about ourselves? Do we experience a sense of real pleasure when we know that we have been helpful to someone else or we have eased another’s burden? Or do we get annoyed because we aren’t properly thanked or acknowledged? Which of these things is about the reward that Jesus speaks about?

British clergyman, John Henry Newman, in the nineteenth century, has been quoted as saying, “Virtue is its own reward, and brings with it the truest and highest pleasure; but if we cultivate it only for pleasure's sake, we are selfish, not religious, and will never gain the pleasure, because we can never have the virtue.” It would seem that our motivation in doing good and kind things is the determining factor in whether or not we get out of those actions what we had expected in terms of how we feel about ourselves or if we walk away disappointed because we were not applauded, lauded and thanked.

Certainly our kind acts are about our relationship with God. We want God to be pleased with us. We want to be in God’s good graces ... because of our love for God, not because God is going to do something good for us in return. Our acts of kindness are motivated by our love for God, but when these acts are between us and God, our human relationships flourish as well. It’s wonderful to be thanked, but not necessary. And since we’re dealing with human beings ... who don’t always do things the way they should ... their ‘thank you’ may not come to us in the way we think we deserve. But because our motivation had more to do with our love for God and our own self-esteem, these relationships with no ‘thank you’ can remain intact. If we are motivated by our love for God and not by our desire to be applauded by others, then we know when we are in the Lord’s good graces and that’s enough.

But there's even more to this short gospel message this morning than looking forward to being rewarded by God. Jesus talks to his disciples about what they will face when they go out into the world. He's already told them about the hardships to come, the persecution, and the rejection. And he has told them about how to handle these things when they happen. He has encouraged them not to lose faith as they encounter them. And now he tells them how it will be when people welcome them.

Perhaps he's remembering his own feelings along the way ... how he felt when Peter and Andrew welcomed him and joined him ... or James and John ... or Matthew the tax collector. Perhaps those who welcomed Jesus ... who recognized Jesus as something very special and came to understand him to be the Messiah ... perhaps these people warmed Jesus' heart. And he knows that when his disciples go out, they, too, will encounter people who will welcome them ... people who will recognize them for special emissaries and will take them in. Perhaps Jesus is remembering what it felt like to him for the dove of the Holy Spirit to meet him as he came up out of the water at this baptism. Perhaps he is remembering what it felt like to him for the angels to appear and minister to him after the long 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. And perhaps he's remembering how the people of Capernaum embraced him long before he made a name for himself ... or the faith of a Roman centurion who begged for Jesus to heal his slave even though the slave was miles away. The faith of those who recognized Jesus must have been very gratifying to him. It was ... in a sense ... his reward.

And no act of kindness in the name of a disciple will go unnoticed. Jesus says that even giving cold water to a little one in the name of Jesus will be remembered by God. There are no acts too small for the Lord to notice. The many small acts of love that happen right here in this congregation do not go unnoticed by God ... the faithfulness of the ones who sing in the choir each Sunday ... the faithfulness of those who welcome visitors to our service and help them navigate the service itself ... the ones who make coffee and bring food to feed others after the service ... the ones who serve as acolytes ... the ones who offer a ride to a fellow parishioner who can't drive ... the ones who show up faithfully for Adult Formation ... the ones who provide the beautiful music that makes our spirits soar ... the ones who meet regularly to make decisions for the welfare of the whole congregation ... the ones who fix the things that are broken and build the things we need ... the ones who make sure our altar linens are in good order ... the ones who take care of the money given of the church ... and the ones who organize our outreach to others. Some of these things are big things in service to the Church and some of them are small. All of them count. And all of them are seen by God.

God doesn't overlook ... and God doesn't forget. No kind and faithful act done in the name of Jesus Christ is ever wasted. The reward we have is in our relationship with God and in the abundant life that He provides for us. Perhaps it isn't stars in our crown that we get. Perhaps it is smiles in the heart of God that we get in response to what we do in His name and for His sake. And that's the best reward of all. It's all about the relationship.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.