

“The Reward of the Righteous”

Psalm 86:1-12; Matthew 10:40-42 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 28, 2020

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to share
your welcome. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

One of the greatest challenges for those of us who seek guidance from scripture is the vast divide between our own language and culture and the language and culture of those who wrote our scriptures. I say language and culture because it's possible to learn the languages and thereby dive more deeply into scripture. But even if we know what each of the words mean, without a clearer sense of the culture, it's hard to tell if, in fact, in the particular way they've been put together, certain arrangements of words might mean the exact opposite of what they seem to mean. To put it more simply: irony doesn't necessarily translate well across languages, cultures, and centuries. I bring this up because when I hear Jesus talking about “a prophet's reward,” it feels as much like a threat as it does a promise.

Prophets did not have a reputation for being treated all that well. Torture, stoning, exile, martyrdom – are you feeling the rewards yet? Jesus himself made mention of prophets being murdered more than once. So when he's suddenly offering the disciples “a prophet's reward,” why would they assume that's a good thing? Perhaps “the reward of the righteous” might be a better choice? Unless you recall the Beatitudes where Jesus is calling blessed “those who are persecuted for

righteousness' sake". It seems impossible to me that there aren't multiple layers of meaning being expressed here.

Now at this point, some of you are wanting to mutter about why can't Pastor Rebecca just let us have an uplifting, positive look at scripture once in a while? Jesus is obviously talking about heavenly rewards, and maybe that's good enough. It's Installation Sunday, and there's plenty of material in here to inspire and motivate lay leaders to diligent Christian service. Okay, let's do that!

Let's start by looking at the various characters in this story, because there are more of them than you might think. This passage is the end of Jesus' instructions to his disciples, as he's about to send them out to minister in his name. In that sense, it's perfect for our occasion today! So there are the disciples, and there's Jesus. But there are many others mentioned. Most importantly, there's God, named here as "the one who sent me." Often, when we're reading scripture passages, it's helpful to see which characters we identify with. I think it's safe to assume we're not identifying with Jesus or God. Maybe the disciples, but let's keep looking.

Beyond those three, we have "a prophet," "a righteous person," "these little ones," and the most expansive character at all, "whoever". Surely we can relate to "whoever!" In fact, I would say that once we realize we can be "whoever," we can also imagine being the prophet or the righteous person or even the little ones. We are all of these different characters at different times, or at least, we have the potential to be. Different moments call for different roles. Sometimes we're giving the cup of

water, and sometimes we're the one who is thirsty. So let's look a little more deeply at what it is Jesus is saying all these different characters do.

There is a word used even more often than the word "whoever" in this passage. It's "welcome". And that right there could be the end. Our lesson today is that Welcome is a really good way to describe the ministry of the church. But it's also a word we use so often that we're in danger of letting it be emptied of its meaning. Welcome is obviously about hospitality, which was important to these disciples who were about to embark on lengthy journeys without any hotel reservations. But it's about so much more than that. This isn't any old welcome Jesus was talking about. He starts using this other phrase "in the name of," and it's clear that has to mean something.

The welcome Jesus is asking us to provide and receive is the welcome in Jesus' name. That means our welcome needs to communicate Jesus' love and wisdom. When he says that even offering a cup of cold water qualifies, he's not inviting us to give the bare minimum; he's reminding us that the most compassionate welcome is the one that recognizes the fellow humanity of the one being welcomed. To recognize the physical thirst of another invites us to confess our own thirst. To satisfy that thirst in another helps us name our own vulnerability. The welcome that is given and received in Jesus' name is an experience of mutuality, in which both giver and receiver are reminded of "the one who sent me," for whom we all thirst and in whom we are all satiated.

This is why, when we install our lay leaders every year, we remind them that “serious commitment to one’s own spiritual development is part of the role of congregational leaders, both for your sake and as an example for other members of the congregation, so that the basic Christian disciplines of worship, prayer, study and stewardship become an integral part of your being.” We don’t want to offer just any old welcome here. We are about offering welcome in the name of Jesus, a welcome that points to Jesus, a welcome that helps people feel seen as though with the eyes of the God who created them and adores them unconditionally, a welcome that satisfies their soul thirst. We cannot do that if we are not continually experiencing that welcome ourselves, by spending time in the presence of God. As the Disciples Statement of Identity puts it, “we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.”

I want to celebrate these two W-words today: welcome and whoever. We’ve got a bunch of whoevers we could add to this story. Whoever makes a meal for a family going through challenges. Whoever stands outside a nursing home to sing “Happy Birthday” to a woman who barely knows who you are. Whoever helps build our weird, new worship service by writing a prayer days early and emailing it to the pastor. Whoever opens their mind to new ways of serving communion. Whoever provides granola bars for our neighbors living without shelter. Whoever works their way through the directory checking in on others, since we can’t see each other in person every Sunday. Whoever marches in the streets for justice and listens to the

pain of victims of injustice. Whoever sends in a board report, even when you're not you have much to say. Whoever wears your mask even though it's uncomfortable or does the shopping for an older friend or finds new ways to keep children occupied in this strange season devoid of communal activities. You are welcoming God's children in the name of Jesus. You are recognizing the humanity of your fellow human beings and confessing your own need to be seen as a beloved child of God. You are serving up cups of not just cold water, but Living Water.

So is that it? Is that the reward? I still think Jesus was saying a couple different things when he promised us "a prophet's reward." The truth is that when you step into leadership in a congregation you are often rewarded with things like more work, more responsibility, more emails, more tedious meetings, and more complaints. I bring this up because I firmly believe it's important to enter into commitments with our eyes wide open. But it's also true that those aren't the only rewards. And the other rewards aren't only heavenly. When church people grab hold of what God is doing in our midst and align ourselves with that movement, the experience of the Holy Spirit is something to behold. When we manage to open our hearts to be welcomed as much as we do the welcoming, we discover needs met that we didn't even realize we had, and the relief is astounding. When we truly offer welcome in the name of Jesus, we find ourselves welcomed by Jesus. What better reward could we seek? Hallelujah and Amen!