

“Our Reward”

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19th Sun./Pentecost
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Let us pray... O God,
May we not fear judgment, but allow love to work through us
so that we never have to worry about fear or judgment.
When we have to judge, may it be in ways that take into account
how we hope to be judged, and to forgive as generously as we hope to be forgiven.
May we live our lives so as to fill our hearts with treasures of love, and so,
be worthy of the rewards that come from you, O God, in the time to come.

Amen

Last week, I visited Union Congregational UCC at Tavares
and recited my paraphrase of the whole Sermon on The Mount.
I pointed out that it was a “3 point sermon” and a number of people laughed –
probably the retired ministers in the group who have been taught
that the classic format for a good sermon has three teaching points.

In this case:

*You’ve heard that it was said, ‘One Way’,
but I say to you, ‘God is still speaking’.
So, don’t pray, donate, serve just for show,
because God is with you wherever you go.
Therefore, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ –
or else!*

Afterwards, I invited the congregation to respond:

*What did you hear? What did you hear in a new way?
Do you agree? What do you suggest?*

One woman commented that Jesus’ teaching about judgment –
or rather pre-judgment, helped her to recognize
that she tended to be judgmental herself.

Another woman asked,

‘What do you mean by ‘or else’?’

In the United Church of Christ, we do not emphasize
the threat of ‘hellfire & brimstone’ as a way to bring people
to make a decision for Christ:
to accept him as Lord & Savior – or suffer eternal consequences.

Instead, we say,

‘No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey,
you are welcome here.’

Willard, p.2

However, the third part of the Sermon on The Mount does say
there are consequences for those who pre-judge
and that the measuring stick for how we evaluate others
and the maneuver room we offer, will be applied to us.
Furthermore, Christians whose laser sharp “attention to detail”
for identifying error in someone else, should use it –
but... to help them, for their sake.

There are consequences for people who choose the wide and easy way
of greed and lust to take unfair advantage of the vulnerable.

Like Jesus said,

*[It] would be better off [for them if they were] thrown into the ocean
with a heavy stone tied around their necks.*

Jesus said they are not to be trusted with sacred things –
like positions of authority.

Jesus did not mince words for such people,
calling them ‘dogs’, ‘swine’, ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’,
‘rotten’ trees, literal-minded ‘Pharisees’,
and foolish contractors who build houses on sand.

Even those who say, ‘Lord! Lord!’ are not beyond divine judgment,
which goes against fundamentalist teaching
about the exclusiveness of Christian salvation.

In this regard, Jesus warns against such people
who use their power and influence for personal advancement –
especially, in his name.

He has a lot to say about hypocrites who pray, donate, and fast
just for show in the public square,
and that in the time to come, many will dare to say to him,
“Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy and cast out demons and
do many mighty works in your name?”

But it won’t be enough to justify those who lived by the letter of the Law
and not the Spirit of the Law, because their ‘lawlessness’ was really
just “loveless-ness”.

Though Jesus did say ‘Many’ would say to him, “Lord, Lord...”,
my understanding of that text is that he did not mean
“most” who say, “Lord, Lord...”

The people who should be concerned are those who
fester with anger, and call other people idiots,
and are just basically clueless about their casual insults.

Willard, p.3

Instead, when Jesus talks about how difficult it is

for most of us to pass through that narrow gate to find 'authentic life',

I believe he is really challenging worrywarts to trust more.

How many people do you know who live in a state of awe and contentment?

Not many, but aren't there some who do?

Even though most of us don't, that's OK –

but wouldn't it be better if we did less worrying and more believing?

We should take the promises of God through Christ, more literally

that we are loved and forgiven and that we should do the same for others.

We should literally believe that – someday,

we'll all meet at the top of the Heavenly stairs to be pleasantly surprised,

wondering why we were so hard on ourselves in the first place.

I expect what Jesus meant about being 'salted with fire' was that

we all pass through the fires of truth to be rid of what is false and hurtful.

For some of us that will be like a walk in the park

on a cool, spring afternoon.

Those who get stuck at the door will be those who refuse to give up being right

and who prefer to go on arguing to justify themselves.

Even then, God will be merciful.

James 2:13^b

So, it is not for the words and deeds we do

out of desperation or foolishness, that we get judged,

but for the habit of our hearts in how we make decisions

and how we allow love to work through us – or not..

Love essentially, is what gets us into Heaven –

that is to say, how we love others, how we love ourselves, too,

and how we are loved by others.

I believe it comes down to us – that it's really us who do the judging –

though it is Christ who holds the mirror up to us like a 'glass darkly'.

When we are able to look past ourselves – past our self-consciousness,

it is then that we can see face to face with God through Christ,

who welcomes us in.

Jesus uses the metaphor of 'salt' and to be 'salted with fire'.

Since ancient times, salt has been used as a preservative.

In Matthew's version of Jesus' teachings, when salt has lost its taste,

it is to be thrown out for people to trample on.

But anybody from up North knows that this means it's still good for something

like throwing down on snowy roads and slippery sidewalks in the winter!

Just as salt still works in that situation, the blessing of God is still able

to work its grace in our lives no matter how messy the road is.

Willard, p.4

Salt is also a kind of spice, not just with regard to food –
for example, there is ‘salty’ humor.

These days, people must be careful with that kind of humor
for the sake of their audience.

Yet at the same time, we must not lose the ability to laugh at our humanity
and maintain a willingness to trust one’s guiding passion
for a loving, authentic life.

That does not mean we get to do our own thing at the expense of others’ rights,
but it does mean to live fully, joyfully, abundantly, authentically.

It is to be alive in the moment –
which is also where ‘life eternal’ is found.

There is so much that is distressing in this present world,
so there is a great need for people to be re-enchanted about life.
Random acts of violence and depravity through domestic and sexual violence,
opioid painkiller addiction, crushing poverty, broken trust and hypocrisy,
health crises of body, mind, and spirit,
the threat of war, recession, and environmental disasters
all threaten to weigh us down and bring us low.

Death would seem like a way out,
but our tradition does not tell us much about what lies ahead.

‘Who would these fardels bear?’ as Hamlet said.
Why would we struggle with our burdens if we knew?
We don’t know, so we have to deal with life.

We cannot so easily escape this world without facing
consequences yet unknown.

We have to have courage – we have to have that preservative
of ‘salt’ in ourselves, grit, even, as the kind that
gives you traction on slippery paths to narrow gateways.

We are living in a time where courage is required of us.

It is too late to be naïve, but it is never too late to choose innocence
and the courage to live authentically – and that is the spice of life.

Nevertheless in the time to come – according to our tradition,
everyone will be raised up in the resurrection at the end of time –
but there will be ‘rewards’.

Jesus does speak of a ‘reward’ for us in the time to come.

He speaks of it frequently in the Beatitudes & the Sermon on The Mount.

I have wondered just what those ‘rewards’ may be.

But first, Jesus tells us what is expected for us to receive such ‘rewards’...

With the promise that we will receive answers and help from God,
we are to ask, search, and knock at the door.

Matthew 7:7-8

Just as we are faithful to care for those we love,
how much more so will God provide for us.

Matthew 7:11

As you seek God's 'kingdom' and 'righteousness' in this life,
our needs will be provided for regardless of our earthly circumstances.

Matthew 6:33a

Willard, p.5

As we live our lives faithfully and practice our faith,
we will be rewarded for
 generosity especially when done anonymously,
we will be rewarded for
 praying even when we are alone, and
we will be rewarded for fasting –
 which is another way of talking about serving,
 without bringing attention to our service.

Matthew 6:1-18

This still doesn't tell us what the rewards will be...

Relationship and recognition is part of the reward:

Those who live by the law of loving-kindness will be
 '... great in the kingdom of heaven' .

Matthew 5:19b

When you 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
[you will become] sons [and daughters] of your [Heavenly Guardian]'

Matthew 5:44b-45a

You will be forgiven as a reward for forgiving others
and in accordance with how you forgive.

Matthew 6:14-15

Then there are the earthly treasures you store up in your heart
which will be there for you in Heaven.

Matthew 6:19-21

We are promised a place in Heaven – a House built upon a rock, and that
this 'rock' is the Good News we received through Jesus' words & deeds.

Matthew 7:24-25

We are told that God's House is a House of many mansions
which suggests the forms the Church has taken through the centuries
as well as the various cultural and religious forms
true human community has taken since the Beginning.

John 14:22

'Anyone who isn't against us is for us.'

Mark 9:40

Another clue to what rewards are yet ahead for us
can be found in The Beatitudes. Hear my telling of Matthew 5:1-12

Willard, p.6

*To be ripened are those who are challenged by poverty and disability,
for theirs is the Beloved Community of Heaven.*

*To be ripened are those who suffer,
for they shall be healed.*

*To ripened are those who are humbled,
for they shall win it all in the end.*

*To be ripened are those who hunger & thirst for justice,
for they shall be satisfied.*

*To be ripened are those who are merciful,
for they shall receive mercy.*

*To be ripened are those who are peace-builders,
for they shall be called the children of God.*

*To be ripened are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice
for theirs, too, is the Beloved Community of Heaven.*

Amen

Our lesson from James 5:13-20 –

*as found in the Contemporary English Version,
speaks to the power of prayer.*

*As we make our needs known to God, we show that we trust God
and that we are open to healing possibilities...*

[James the Just said,]

¹³ If you are having trouble, you should pray.

And if you are feeling good, you should sing praises.

¹⁴ If you are sick, ask the church leaders to come and pray for you.

Ask them to put olive oil on you in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵ If you have faith when you pray for sick people, they will get well.

The Lord will heal them, and if they have sinned, he will forgive them.

¹⁶ If you have sinned, you should tell each other what you have done.

Then you can pray for one another and be healed.

The prayer of an innocent person is powerful, and it can help a lot.

¹⁷ Elijah was just as human as we are, and for three and a half years

his prayers kept the rain from falling.

¹⁸ But when he did pray for rain,

it fell from the skies and made the crops grow.

¹⁹ My friends, if any followers have wandered away from the truth,

you should try to lead them back.

²⁰ If you turn sinners from the wrong way,

you will save them from death, and many of their sins will be forgiven.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 9:38-50

38 John said,

“Teacher, we saw a man using your name to force demons out of people.
But he wasn’t one of us, and we told him to stop.”

39 Jesus said to his disciples:

Don’t stop him!

No one who works miracles in my name will soon turn
and say something bad about me.

40 Anyone who isn’t against us is for us.

41 And anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name,
just because you belong to me, will surely be rewarded.

42 It will be terrible for people who cause even one
of my little followers to sin.

Those people would be better off thrown into the ocean
with a heavy stone tied around their necks.

43-44 So if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!

You would be better off to go into life crippled
than to have two hands and be thrown
into the fires of hell that never go out.

45-46 If your foot causes you to sin, chop it off.

You would be better off to go into life lame
than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

47 If your eye causes you to sin, get rid of it.

You would be better off to go into God’s kingdom with only one eye
than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.

48 The worms there never die, and the fire never stops burning.

49 Everyone must be salted with fire.

50 Salt is good. But if it no longer tastes like salt,
how can it be made salty again?

Have salt among you and live at peace with each other.