



---

## **The Reward**

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given July 2, 2017  
Matthew 10:40-42*

Every once in a while we have occasion to ask ourselves, what really matters? We go about our every day lives, and except for times of extreme transition or loss, things are ordinary. We wake up, maybe hitting the snooze a bunch of times, and we go about our morning routines. For me that always includes coffee and the race to feed my meowing cat before she wakes up the rest of the household. We go to work, or to school, or when we are out of work or sick or in between things we stay at home, wondering how we are going to spend our days. We interact with the families we have or the neighbors or co-workers or friends we have, or maybe, if we live alone, we wonder who it is that we will interact with. We prepare our food and we take care of our homes. We make our plans and we watch the news, maybe, or maybe just surf facebook because CNN is too depressing. And in the middle of all that, it is easy to go hours or days or weeks or years without ever saying, what is the point? What is actually important about what I occupy myself with everyday? How much of the things I gnash my teeth about actually matter?

Every once in a while, something real and true and beautiful crashes through the humdrum of every day existence and wakes us up to what is actually important, and if we are awake enough to pay attention, that can change everything.

The other morning I was at my desk in the kitchen studying for this sermon. I was looking at all the scriptural texts, reading through them. I read through the story about God and Abraham and Isaac and I thought, that's a really difficult and intense text for the weekend of July 4, and I

don't want to tackle it. Then I read Romans and got mired in the twists and turns of Paul's theology. Then I read the gospel text, this short text from Matthew, and started wondering what kind of reward Jesus was talking about. He says, those who welcome his disciples welcome him, and those who welcome him welcome the one who sent him. Those who welcome a prophet get a prophet's reward. Those who welcome a righteous person get a righteous person's reward. Just what does Jesus mean by that reward, I was thinking? Just then my daughter Carly walked up, sleepy in her morning pajamas, and climbed onto my lap. She asked what I was doing and I said I was studying for my sermon. I asked her, Do you think we get a reward for following the way of Jesus? Do you think we should get a reward for following the way of Jesus? She said, yeah, I think we get a reward and I think we should get a reward. Ok, I said, what do you think the reward is? She said, it's simple, Mama. It's love. Jesus loves us. That's the reward. Then she climbed off my lap and headed over to the cupboard to get some cereal.

This is the hazard of being a preacher's kid first thing in the morning. But I thought about her answer, and I thought about the whole idea of rewards in following the way of Jesus, in being a disciple of Jesus, and I thought this is something that's worth exploring for all of us. Why do we do what we do? Why do we gather here at St. Stephen's, 2000 years after Jesus lived and died and rose again and ascended into heaven? Why does Len Slade recruit ushers and grill hot dogs and build nativity sets? Why does Sue Jordan prepare the building for 200 teenagers twice a year when we have TEC? Why does Molly Reichard spend endless hours shaping our communication platforms and our website and emails and everything we say about ourselves? Why do you come here, why are you here on a Sunday morning when you could be sipping French Roast in your pajamas and reading the New York Times, or fishing on the lake, or catching a few extra hours of sleep? Why did I leave my family's cabin in Wisconsin early this morning to drive a couple of hours to get here in time for the 8:00am service? What is it worth? Why do we do it? What is our reward?

The text from Matthew comes at the end of a chapter we call Jesus' missionary discourse. He is about to send his twelve disciples out ahead of

him, to go travel throughout Israel preaching good news to people. Before he sends them, he has a lot to teach them to prepare them for the journey they are about to undertake. He is sending them out without suitcases or money or insurance policies to people who may or may not welcome them. He is sending them with nothing but the good news that the kingdom of heaven is close at hand, whatever that means. And he is sending them out with the assurance that some will welcome them, and others will persecute them. In fact prophets, the prophets he mentions in today's text, nearly always are persecuted. So what is this reward he is mentioning?

My daughter Carly's answer, for the love of Jesus, is the right one, and it sounds so simple, but if we took it seriously it would change everything about the way we live. The reward is not safety, or the assurance of prosperity or welcome or even health in this world. The reward is the experience of the kingdom of heaven, the experience that we bring Christ to people and we discover and encounter Christ who is in them already, especially in those who are naked or sick or hungry or in prison, as Matthew 25 talks about. The reward is the grace of God which catches us up into God's embrace exactly as we are, and that embrace, which is free, paradoxically costs us everything because it calls us to follow Jesus. The reward of following Jesus is the same thing as the cost of following Jesus: it is love, love that gives us everything and demands everything of us as well. It is love that utterly reorients us to service, to following the risen Christ. Then, every little thing we do, even giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, or hauling a thermos of lemonade to Wooddale Park for the Family Potluck Picnic in two weeks, or walking up to someone you don't know at St. Stephens or on the street corner or in your child's school and offering them kindness and hospitality, becomes its own reward because in in these acts we encounter Christ and are transformed by him.

I'm glad Jesus mentions the cup of cold water in today's gospel text, because that's all most of us can manage sometimes. When we start having big epic conversations about what matters, what the reward is, what the point is, we can get overwhelmed and not know how to answer the question. We get overwhelmed because we wish the reward was health, continued life and well-being for us and our loved ones, a relief from

financial insecurity or political turmoil or oppression or injustice. But the reward is the experience of encountering the risen Christ by being willing to follow him, like his disciples did, out of our comfort zone and into our daily lives, where we offer the love of Jesus to people and discover it is already there with them, and sometimes it is even ready to be returned to us.

The reward for following the way of Jesus is the same as the cost of following Jesus: it is allowing ourselves to be loved so radically that it empowers us to love all, without conditions, so that every little thing we are and do becomes permeated with that love. It means following Jesus, the risen Christ, not a good idea or a set of rules, because love is always about a person and not an abstraction. And if all this sounds way too ferocious and heady and epic for you, start with the small things, the little gestures of unconditional love you might offer in the form of a cup of cold water or a random act of kindness or forgiveness to someone who doesn't deserve it, in the name of Christ, and see what your reward becomes. Amen.