

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Pentecost Sunday- May 27, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 106:1-5 & Matthew 6:1-18

TRUE REWARD

Over the years, in looking at and reflecting on my own life and in observing and talking with others about theirs, I've come to the conclusion that we all want to be recognized. We all want to be affirmed. We all want to know that we truly matter.

Those wants run so deep that I think it's fair to say they're genuine needs.

I remember how great it felt as a kid to have one of my parents notice and praise me for the way I played ball, or took care of my chores, or succeeded in school. As an adult, it's not much different. It still feels good to have people recognize and affirm what I do. When what I do gets praised, it helps me feel worthy.

The experiences of being noticed for what we do, of being affirmed for it, and of feeling worthy as a result are in the foreground of Jesus' teaching from his Sermon on the Mount that we heard in today's second Scripture. At the start of Matthew 6, he highlights the temptation we have to seek these experiences through our acts of religious devotion. He names giving to those in need, praying, and fasting as specific examples of such devotion and takes for granted that these are all good things to do. But just as he does throughout his Sermon on the Mount, he stresses that the way, the spirit, the motive in which we do them makes all the difference.

In 1st century Palestine, Jews were assessed a tax that was meant to help those who were poor. People who paid the tax, but went beyond it to give even more to the poor received public honor for doing so- like getting a choice seat in the synagogue next to the rabbi. Some of these "extra givers" were also apparently in the habit of drawing further public attention to their giving by, as Jesus says, "announcing it with trumpets . . . in the synagogues and on the streets".

As far as prayer was concerned, Jews in Jesus' era also were obligated just as Muslims are today to pray at certain designated times each day. Jesus notes that some of his Jewish contemporaries would make sure they were in very visible public places whenever those prayer times rolled around. Others couldn't help but see how conscientiously they carried out their prayer duties.

In Jesus' time, Jewish tradition also designated certain days for fasting. Again, there were those who'd go to great lengths to make sure others would see them fasting. They'd rub ashes on their faces and go painfully barefoot to impress on others the rigor and seriousness of their fasting discipline.

To us now, displays like those probably seem ridiculously showy. But it is worth asking if we have our own more subtle ways of doing similar things. Are we sometimes, for example, less than honest in our praying because we want God, other people, and ourselves to think that we're better than we really are? Do we ever hold back in our giving of time, talent, and treasure for the sake of others because we feel that somehow our giving in the past hasn't been sufficiently noticed and appreciated? Do we sometimes sprinkle our conversation with hints about the good things we've done or are doing because we're not quite sure that enough people know about them? More broadly, do we base any of our self-worth on the kinds of externals that often seem so important in our wider culture, things that actively encourage us to play to the crowd like looks and style, education and work, money and possessions?

However any of that may be with each of us, it's important to admit frankly with Jesus that receiving public notice and approval for good things we do definitely brings its own reward. Jesus says this clearly about those who make a display of their giving, praying, or fasting, "(T)hey have received their reward." Their reward is the good feeling that comes from other people recognizing and affirming what we do.

Yet Jesus has a much bigger and more substantial point to make. He wants us to understand that this sort of reward is so much *less* than the one these acts of devotion are meant to give. Our giving, praying, and fasting are meant to bring us more fully into God's reign. They're meant to unite us more truly with God's purposes, to help us love more faithfully in the ways that God loves. When they do, they bring us the greatest, deepest, highest and truest reward. They bring us into communion with God, into the joy of life as it's meant to be.

That's why Jesus calls us hypocrites if we do our good deeds mainly for the notice and approval of others. In his time, *upokritos* was the Greek word for "actor". In Greek theatre, actors literally wore masks. They wore them to help them play for themselves and others deeds and characters different from the ones they did and were in real life. Jesus says that to give, pray, and fast for the notice and approval of others is to do the same thing. It means putting on a mask that hides from us and from others the true purpose and reward of what we're doing and of who we really are.

We are God's children. We're God's beloved who give, pray, and fast not for the notice and approval of others, but in order to live more fully in God's reign. In the joy of God's kingdom come, we know that we're noticed, affirmed, and matter in the eyes of the One who has made us. We're noticed, affirmed, and matter in the heart of the One who better than anyone knows and loves us for who we really are. To dwell, to relax, to bask in that ultimate recognition, affirmation, and sense of worth is our greatest, deepest, highest, and truest reward.

The famous prayer that Jesus teaches us in today's second Scripture keeps us pointed towards this life in God's reign. "Pray then in this way," he says. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

The traditional ending that the church later gave to this prayer reminds us of why it's so important to pray our lives into it. The One whose Kingdom, power, and glory are forever is none other than "Our Father in heaven". Jesus says the Almighty Maker of everything is our "Abba", our Papa who loves us infinitely. This God has made us in God's own image and wants only the best for us.

Our Abba in heaven is holy. Made in the image of this holy God the best for each of us is to be holy just as our Abba is. So the first thing Jesus says to pray is, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name."

Help us, O God, to be holy like You are, to live in faithfulness to Your Kingdom come, to Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Your holy will is for Your mighty love to prevail everywhere, in and among everyone throughout Your whole creation.

To live faithful to Your love, O God, we need our daily bread, no more and no less. We need also and especially to forgive and be forgiven. It's the only way Your love can grow among us—we who so often sin and are sinned against. And we need Your help to resist temptation, the many temptations we have to play to the crowd, to chase after the small and fickle rewards it can give, to play into the hands of the evil one by drifting away from life in Your reign, by forgetting where our greatest, deepest, highest, and truest reward can be found.

Here's a true story of a man who didn't forget. Christian writer, Garrett Keizer, tells it of him, beginning with the commute of a woman who lived in Victory, Vermont. Victory's a town so small and out-of-the-way that it has no stores, no schools, and no churches. Its only claim to fame is twofold- it has a big bog and was the last town in Vermont to get electricity.

In the course of earning her master's degree, this woman had to drive several times a week to the state university in Burlington. It's a good hundred miles away. Each night as she came home from school she would see an old man sitting by the side of the road. He was always there no matter how bad the weather might be, and if you've ever been to Vermont, you know the weather there can get pretty bad. It can be raining, it can be freezing, and it certainly can be snowing. But it never seemed to matter. Whatever the conditions, the old man was there.

He never acknowledged the passing of the woman's car, but she always saw him. He sat there like a gnarled old tree, his cap and shoulders covered frequently with snow.

Over time, the woman became very curious about him. Who was he? What brought him out to sit at that same spot night after night? Finally, she asked one of her neighbors, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road every night?"

Her neighbor replied, "Sure, I've seen him many times."

"Well, is he a little touched in the head? I mean, does he ever go home?"

Her neighbor laughed and said, "He's no more touched than you or me. And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of your driving by yourself out late at night all alone on these back roads; so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your tail-light disappear around the bend he knows you're OK. Then he goes home to bed."

He's a man who remembers where our true reward is found. It's found living in God's reign, doing quiet, joyful, almost invisible deeds of loving care. It's found there because the Kingdom, the power, and the glory that are forever belong to God. They shine forever on those who dwell in God's reign. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff