

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 2, 2023

JEREMIAH 28:5-9 | PSALM 89:1-4, 15-18 | ROMANS 6:12-13 | MATTHEW 10:40-42

Some days, it seems like half of the emails and texts we get are spam. Thankfully, they're usually pretty easy to spot. They often come from a suspicious email address like homedepot@yahoo.com. They almost always have a suspiciously high number of typos in them. And nearly all of them say some version of this: "Click here to claim your reward."

If those spammers said, "Click here to read the terms and conditions," no one would ever click on them. But they know that we're hard-wired for rewards. We like to feel like our efforts are noticed and appreciated. So if you help find a neighbor's pet, you'll be given a reward. If you participate in a library's summer reading program, you'll be offered rewards. If you so much as buy a two-dollar cup of coffee at Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks, you'll be asked if you'd like to enroll in a rewards program.

And so our ears may perk up toward the end of today's gospel reading in which Jesus talks about caring for the vulnerable. "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple," he tells us, "Truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

You could imagine reading this text through the lens of reward.¹ And it would probably sound something like this. *It's super nice of you to give a cup of water to people, Jesus says. I'll enroll you in our rewards program. And whenever you do something like that, I'll give you a point. And at the end of your life, we can add up how many points you got. And then you can trade in the points for a special reward.*

If that's the way you read this text, you'll probably give people a lot of water. Which is great. But it will create some problems, too. Because whenever you give someone a cup of water, you'll be turning around to see what's on that divine scoreboard. Did God notice? Did I get the point? Am I making any progress toward this reward? If the primary way we think about service is through being rewarded for our actions, our attention will always be drifting away from the people we serve. We'll give them a cup of water, but we'll be looking around to see if anyone noticed.

And some of you may know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of this kind of interaction. It feels pretty awful. You start wondering, did they do that nice thing because they care about me? Or because they wanted this other thing? Are they just trying to puff up their ego or fill out a college application or just look good for their friends? If we think other people are just seeking rewards for their service, we'll be skeptical whether they really have our best interests at heart.

But Jesus doesn't understand service in terms of reward. He sees it through the lens of connection and solidarity. We saw that right at the beginning of today's gospel reading. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Jesus says that we represent something greater than themselves.

Imagine for a moment that, as we sometimes do, we had an assistant to the bishop here for worship or one of Congressman Gottheimer's staffers at an event. What would happen if you sat in a pew next to the assistant to the bishop and never said a word to them? Or what would happen if you swiped the staffer's parking space in the lot? Someone might say to you, "Don't you realize

¹ See Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (Zondervan, 2009), 10.

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who that is?” We interact with that person not just as an individual but as a representing something larger.

That’s sort of what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is drawing together God the Father and Jesus, hosts and guests. When we encounter Jesus, we’re encountering God. And when we encounter other people, we’re encountering Jesus. So when you extend hospitality to someone—particularly someone who does not seem to be of great importance, the “little ones”—you are extending hospitality to Jesus. And so even very simple acts—like giving someone a cup of water—become deeply meaningful. Not because of the act itself but because of the relationship it acknowledges.

We know there was a practice in the early church where people would set up empty guest rooms in their homes. And if someone was passing through and needed a place to stay, you would put them up for a night. And, as if the point wasn’t clear, in one of his homilies the fourth-century writer John Chrysostom said that you should call this room not the “guest room” or the “extra room” but “Christ’s room.”² The idea being that you haven’t just extended hospitality to this individual person, but you’ve welcomed Jesus into your home. You’ve welcomed the one who sent them.

This connection to Jesus puts the whole idea of a “reward” in quite a different light. To be sure, there is a benefit, a positive outcome to extending hospitality, even simple acts of welcome. But the reward isn’t some prize that comes from somewhere else. It isn’t something that’s tracked on a ledger in the sky.

The reward is the vision that recognizes the presence of Christ within and among us. Whenever we encounter the vulnerable, the forgotten, or the marginalized, Jesus asks us, “Don’t you realize who that is?” Our reward is simply that we can say, “Yes,” and live accordingly.

In 1958, the monk and writer Thomas Merton was out running errands when he described a kind of revelation of this connection. “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers ... It was as if I suddenly saw the beauty of their hearts... the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes.”³

This is, of course, an intimidating prospect. To encounter everyone as if they represented Christ drastically expands our sense of responsibility and concern. It’s a world in which we are likely to fall short and fail and have to try again.

And yet, it’s also a cause for hope. The reward is seeing the world not devoid of God’s presence but overflowing with signs of God’s life. And this reward, this vision, Jesus tells us, will never be lost.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² *Homilies on Acts* 45.

³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Crown Publishing Group, 2009), 55.