

Jim Vitale  
Matthew 10:40-42  
A welcome reward

Today's reading is one of the rare instances where Jesus isn't being cryptic. No parables, just a series of clear statements: If you welcome a disciple, you welcome Jesus; if you welcome Jesus, you welcome God. If you welcome a prophet, you get rewarded as a prophet. If you welcome a righteous person, you get rewarded as a righteous person. And if you give a cup of water to a disciple, you get rewarded as a disciple. In short: welcome someone, get the same reward as them. Seems pretty straight forward, right?

It might be tempting for those of us in church to hear Jesus telling us in this passage that we'll be rewarded if we become more welcoming. "Being welcoming" is a major concern of most churches. The average church claims to be welcoming and writes it on its sign, hoping passersby will read it, believe it, and come to a service. I don't think it is a stretch to say that the single most common value statement across congregations is: "we are a welcoming congregation." Most pastors and congregations believe that if we can simply *live up to our claims* of being welcoming, then our churches and ministries will grow and we can spread the gospel. Even if that was true, and spoiler alert: I don't think it is, it would never work. The fact is, the human condition never allows a universal welcome. All churches have their theological, social, and political leanings; if you agree with the church's leaning, you will feel welcome; if you don't, you won't. This may sound extremely pessimistic, but the claim "all are welcome" can't ever really be true. At best, it's white noise; at worst, it's a lie.

Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't be welcoming to new people and each other. Of course we should. But in this passage Jesus doesn't call us to be welcoming, he calls us to *be welcomed*. For the past few weeks in the lectionary we've been working our way through Jesus' short sermon on mission. It began at the outdoor service with Pastor Jen's exploration of disciples and apostles and it ends today with this passage about welcoming and rewards. Throughout this sermon, which takes up all of Matthew chapter 10, Jesus prepares his disciples to go out into the world to participate in the ministry of God. Jesus commissions the disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons, and most of all, spread the good news of Jesus. That is the lens through which we must read this passage. Jesus is not saying that the disciples are to be rewarded for being welcoming to others; rather Jesus is saying that *the reward goes to others* for welcoming the disciples.

The heart of this passage is mission—that is, spreading the good news of Jesus. In the last few decades more and more congregations and organizations have begun to base their understanding of ministry on this passage. They call themselves the missional church movement, and they believe that the church no longer functions effectively as an institution of welcome; rather, they believe that Jesus calls the church to go out into its communities to *be welcomed* by others.<sup>1</sup> The missional church movement believes that Christendom, the culture of Christianity that pervaded the West for over a thousand years, is dead. We can no longer assume that our neighbor is a practicing Christian or that he or she even understands what the Christian church is.

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<sup>1</sup> Pat Keifert's *Welcoming the Stranger* and *We Are Here Now* are excellent introductions to this idea.

So if we can't assume that our neighbors know what church is, then we can't realistically expect them to come to a service. No matter how welcoming we claim to be, no matter how welcoming we may actually be, we won't attract new people because most new people have *no idea* why we even exist. If we return to our passage today, we see that Jesus says it is our mission as disciples to go out and spread the good news of Jesus, to tell our neighbors why we, that is the body of Christ, exist; and Jesus says it is actually the responsibility of our neighbors to *welcome us*.

Jesus says, "whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." When the disciples go out to minister to the world and spread the good news of the kingdom, those who welcome their ministry are, in effect, welcoming both Jesus and God the Father and Mother. So, lest we get puffed up in thinking that we are worthy of some grand welcome from our neighbors, it is not actually we who are being welcomed, but Jesus. The hospitality Jesus expects our neighbors to show us is not ultimately about us, but about Jesus.

But then there's this complicated bit about rewards. What are we supposed to do with all this reward language? In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is *always* talking about rewards, who's getting them, who's not getting them, who has already received them. It gets kind of annoying and it's disturbing to our delicate Lutheran sensibilities. We're sinners! We're saved by grace alone! We don't get rewards! But before we toss Matthew's Gospel out the window, we need to remember that rewards are tricky for Matthew. They are never what they seem. For example, in one parable, a landowner hires workers in the morning and workers in the evening and, though they worked for different lengths of time, he pays them, or rewards them, all with the same amount of money. The amount of work they put in has nothing to do with what they receive. So in Matthew's Gospel, rather than thinking of rewards as something we *earn*, think of them simply as something we are *given*.

We should also keep in mind that, contrary to what we might usually think, rewards, what we are given, are not always positive. Returning to today's passage, Jesus says that whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet, that is, whoever welcomes a prophet knowing full well that he or she is a prophet, that person will receive a prophet's reward. Simply showing hospitality to a prophet gives one access to a prophet's rewards! Sounds great, doesn't it? But remember, rewards aren't always what they seem. Do you remember what the prophets experience? Look at Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, pick any prophet. Hardly anyone listened to them. For the most part, they were ridiculed and persecuted. The so-called reward of a prophet, at least in this life, is a life of frustrations.

Jesus continues saying, anyone who welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. Matthew has a lot to say about righteousness, but he only ever mentions two righteous people by name in his gospel: Joseph, Jesus' father, and Jesus himself. Matthew's standard for righteousness is exceedingly high, and once again we see that the lives of the righteous are not exactly easy.

Finally Jesus says, anyone who gives even a cup of cold water to one of these disciples, will surely not lose his or her reward. If we're wondering what the reward of a disciple is, we need only look a few verses back in the gospel to where Jesus says: "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves...beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because

of me, as a testimony to them.” In Matthew, many of the “rewards” are neither earned nor positive, rather they are simply what the followers of Christ endure in this world. The life of a prophet, disciple, and righteous person is hard.

Jesus says that whoever welcomes a prophet, righteous person or disciple receives their reward as well. Therefore our neighbors who welcome us as followers of Jesus can expect the same hardships we will endure. Why would anybody want to welcome a disciple, let alone be one!?

Jesus never sugar coats anything. He promises us that our lives as prophets, righteous people, and disciples will be hard, and that life won't be any easier for those who show us hospitality. Jesus calls us to walk out into the streets of Dinkytown, down the sidewalks of the University, and into the coffee shops proclaiming the good news of Jesus. But we know that the human condition cannot allow a universal welcome and so there is no promise that we will be welcomed, and there is no promise that the ones who welcome us will then be welcomed by others.

The only promise **is Jesus**. As we heard today, whoever receives us, receives Jesus, and not only Jesus, but God. This is Jesus' promise to us: that wherever we go, whenever we spread the good news, Jesus is with us all the way. And not just with us, but also with the ones who welcome us. As Jesus walks beside us, as we spread the good news of Jesus, the ones who welcome us as disciples become disciples too. Though our work is rewarded with hardships that we do not earn, we are also rewarded by seeing the body of Christ grow.

Jesus promises that as we go out into the world to spread the good news, we and those who welcome us will experience the rewards of hardship. But with Jesus beside us we can endure those hardships because we have hope. We endure the rewards of hardship and spread the good news because Jesus promises another unearned reward. You see, unlike humans who cannot live up to the standards of a universal welcome, at the end of days, Jesus has promised to welcome all of us into his kingdom where there will be no more hardship, where we will dwell forever in the comfort, safety, and love of God. Jesus calls us to the hard road of mission, to throw ourselves at the mercy of our neighbors; but he promises to be with us, every step, all the way into eternity.