

Rewards

Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰ "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

After Jesus' difficult sayings to his disciples when he sent them out to expand his mission of compassion and healing, especially the parts about being called out of your name, and your faith sometime causing family discord, it is so good for Jesus to simply talk about people showing hospitality to each other and receiving rewards! Personally, I love rewards! There are so many businesses and services that give us rewards. When I was a child the rewards were green stamps. If you did enough shopping at our local grocery store, you collected stamps to turn in for a toaster or a fan, or some other small appliance. But there were always stories of big families that pooled their stamps and got a stove or refrigerator. Remember when banks gave you great rates of interest to reward you for allowing them to keep and use your money? I mentioned a few years back that I applied for a new credit card. My question was what financial institution would reward me for using their service. I also have 11 fobs on my keyring. Some give rewards for using specific pharmacies; others for grocery stores, ice cream, Christian books, gasoline, I even have a loyalty card that gives rewards for purchasing soup!

I wonder whether Jesus was talking about those kinds of rewards in our scripture? I think not! In just a few short sentences of power and compassion, we are challenged to think more deeply about what is meant by welcoming one another. It is only after doing so that we discover the reward that comes from the deep hospitality found in God's welcome of us. In today's reading, our focus is on compassionate welcome and hospitality as a form of service to Christ. Reviewing

the list from our scripture of welcome of those who come in the name of Christ, welcome of those who are prophets, welcome of those who are righteous, and even giving cold water, we realize that this welcome can and should be performed by us at any time and is not confined to large heroic acts by those eligible for sainthood. The simple, basic acts of kindness we perform in genuine welcome of one another are all that God asks of us. We must look around us to see who is in need and then do something about it.

Our Christian faith advocates compassionate welcome that encourages us to trust, to be open, to share, to avoid manipulating others, and to live a way of life that is beyond our own personal gain. We are also to be realistic about those things that distort and prevent us from the compassion described in Jesus calling the disciples and us into ministries of compassion and healing in our reading from Matthew two weeks ago. Indeed, the elements of our compassionate welcome are found in the paradox of our lives when human relationships of closeness, warmth, depth, and durability are also tinged with our alienation from each other, the kind Jesus described in last week's reading.

Our will to achieve caring relationships is within our grasp, yet all too often, if left to our devices, we fall short of creating and nurturing the genuine relationships in which we develop into the people God calls us to be. Pride, ego, self-doubt, and their kin sometime keep us from connecting with each other except in self-interested ways. So, we need God's embrace in our lives to live in this contradiction and fulfill our faith, living in compassionate welcome with one another and extending genuine hospitality. In these four short verses, Jesus helps us steer away from distorting others and ourselves through false dependencies, unreasonable expectations, and unjustified hopes. **Emilie M. Townes**

William Goettler shares of his colleague at Yale Divinity School, the Irish liturgical theologian Siobhán Garrigan, tells a story from her travels around Ireland

researching her book *The Real Peace Process*. Arriving at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, Siobhán was pleased to be greeted at the door by two women, church members, who seemed to invite her into conversation. Siobhán realized that these women were ushers of some sort, whose job it was to stand at the door of the church and interview newcomers as they arrived. They quietly asked her name and the first names of any other approaching strangers who wished to join in the morning worship.

Then Siobhán figured out what was happening. Hearing those names, the ushers would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and the Catherines and the Patricks, were told that they were surely in the wrong church and sent on their way. William assumed that Siobhán must be referring to research done decades ago; surely no church would act in this way any longer. His hope was quickly dashed. These were relatively current practice, *within the past ten years*, Siobhán writes.

William thought this is a story foreign to North Americans like himself, because it is about a faraway congregation of Irish Presbyterians, who are nothing like us at all, still fighting their Protestant-Catholic battles. Luckily, we have no such issues. Our society has moved past such discriminatory behavior. We elected an African American president for eight years and knocked down all of the walls and boundaries. In our worshiping communities, everyone is welcome. The churches that we know would never ask the name of a stranger in some covert attempt to find them out and send them off to where they belong.

But would we ask about education and profession? Would we ask about neighborhood lived, club memberships, schools that the children attend? Would we ask about social or political perspective? Do we ask about sexual identity or

family model? Are there norms that really must be established before the doors of the church are flung wide open in welcome?

Jesus addresses the issue in the most personal of terms. He describes the love that families hold for one another, the tenderness with which we care for parents and for children. That tenderness and compassion must be our model for loving all who come into our lives, in Christ's name. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome none other than the Christ. **William Goettler**

Compassionate welcome means approaching each other through God. This is how we recognize that genuine human relationships emerge from putting the grace-filled hospitality of God's love at the center of our lives and at the center of all our relationships. God's hospitality teaches us that close, loving, enduring relationships are to be valued along with distant, occasional, and abrasive ones—as difficult as the latter ones may be. This lively, and sometimes maddening, dynamic is the welcome Jesus speaks of in today's passage. Further, if we live into this welcome with each other, we will find the rich rewards of discipleship found in God.

It is important for us to acknowledge that in oppressive conditions, superficial hospitality alone is an insufficient response. The one who welcomes often continues to be at home and retains a good measure of control; this causes us to welcome those who are dispossessed, the little ones, into our own worlds on terms we ourselves have crafted. It is impossible to develop the reciprocal relationships expressed in this passage, for the host has near absolute control. Note that there is a difference between condescension and paternalism. Neither of these demonstrate the practice of genuine hospitality.

If we really understand Jesus' instructions to us, one response from this heightened awareness is to realize that we must practice not only hospitality but also repentance. Turning from familiar behavior patterns that do not welcome

others, we turn toward acts that signal our willingness to embrace and live the new ways of being found in God. In repentance, our positions of privilege are debunked, and these old ways of being "at home" are acknowledged as being morally bankrupt.

Although Jesus speaks of rewards in this passage, not the ones we get from our credit cards or loyalty to our favorite ice cream shop, we should not offer compassionate welcome with the expectation that something will be returned to us. Love is not always met with love. Jesus is clear with his disciples that being his followers will be difficult at times and that they will suffer persecution. Sometimes love is met with crucifixion; yet we are called to love in the midst of hate—even in those times where it appears that hatred has won.

Compassion, then, grounds itself in a double inconsistency of love where love can lead to tribulation, which then leads us to greater love. With this in mind, we must remember that God's grace continues to act in and through the most hateful situations and that crucifixion is followed by resurrection. With compassionate welcome, Jesus calls us to put our love in jeopardy so that its blessings are made manifest in our lives and in the lives of others. We become the embodiment of Christian compassionate welcome that leads to hospitality in God's spirit of mercy.

Each Sunday in our blessing and benediction, we talk about helping others, but we can't be so prideful to believe we are the ones always to be giving – sometimes we are the ones that need to be receiving. The hospitality rooted in compassionate welcome is both a practice and a spiritual discipline in which we discover that by offering hospitality we may be welcoming something or someone new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our lives. This requires us to recognize another's gifts and vulnerabilities, the need for shelter and sustenance, and encourages us to open up our worldviews and perspectives as well as our hearts and souls.

As we extend hospitality to others, we may well find that we experience new insights and hear new stories of faith that redirect our perceptions. Such witness can stimulate our understanding and spiritual imaginations so that we become new beings. This is the reward we will not lose. **Emilie M. Townes**

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