

WHAT'S IN YOUR HEART?

Sermon, June 26, 2011

Text: Matthew 10:40-42

We've all seen the TV commercials for the Capital One Visa Card, with the big, hairy Viking acting as the spokesman demanding to know ... "What's in YOUR wallet?" If what's in your wallet is not the credit card he is promoting, well, you are missing out on all the *rewards* you could be getting! Every credit card company out there is trying to convince us that running up even more debt is somehow a "rewarding" thing to do, creating "stimulus" for our personal economy by spending more of what we don't have. We will be the recipients of all these wonderful "rewards" if we just use their card for all our purchases. Just raise your personal debt ceiling, and all kinds of good things will come to you! Discounted merchandise, frequent flyer miles, room upgrades, even cash back formulas, are all promised as our "reward" ... our reward for jacking up our monthly bill. For the record, let me state the obvious ... it just doesn't work that way. Increasing debt usually means increasing burden ... both individually and as a nation.

Let me add a personal disclaimer: I use credit cards and find them almost indispensable in today's economy and extremely convenient ... sometimes too much so. But for the most part, all those perks and presents are dangled before our insatiable appetites and desires in order to draw our attention away from our ever escalating debt as well as the bank's usually stratospheric interest rates. Ever increasing debt that's your real "reward" for what's in your wallet (*or, to speak more accurately, for what's increasingly NOT in your wallet, i.e., real money!*). Some of you may remember Tennessee Ernie Ford's number one hit of 1955, "You load sixteen tons what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt! Saint Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go; I owe my soul to the company store." That old song was about a coal miner shoveling his coal and being paid in "scrip" that could only be cashed at the company store. Today it might be stated that you load sixteen credit cards in your wallet and what do you get? Another year older and deeper in debt, owing your soul to the Capital One bank!

A "reward" shouldn't enslave you! A "reward" shouldn't add to your already difficult burden. A "reward" should *reward* you, lift you, elevate you; a reward should set your soul soaring. My mother got both good and bad rewards two weeks ago. She and Dad are both volunteers (*and well-known volunteers*) at the Chester County Hospital in my home town. Apparently, she picked up a nasty "reward" in her volunteering by getting infected with a dastardly intestinal bacterial strain that thrives in hospitals and nursing homes of late, called *Clostridium difficile* ... "c-diff," as the docs call it. Respecting Mom's dignity I won't describe her symptoms, other than to say they were nasty. However, her positive reward of being a volunteer at that hospital was that she was treated like royalty; she received lots of personal care and attention. The same happened with my father when he landed in the hospital a few times. I remember calling the hospital when Dad broke his femur in a freakish stress fracture, and told the switchboard operator, "I'm looking for Alan Clark." With a chuckle, she replied, "You and everyone else in town!" Just as a bit of an aside, I'm happy to say both are well ... in fact, I just returned from a family gathering Friday night in PA. My younger brother was married Friday and all of us were there to celebrate with him; what a joy it was to all be together to share this happy occasion.

The background of our short Gospel selection is that Jesus is preparing His disciples to go out on their first missionary trip. He didn't sugar coat the situation they would be facing. They were about to go out into the world, and that world was full of *people*. Author and pastor John Ortberg draws a delightful analogy from a time he went shopping for a gift for his wife for their first Christmas together: There was a table labeled Damaged Goods ... and he bought his wife a nice dress (*unfortunately, he didn't see the damage on the damaged good until he got home*). He drew the analogy that when it comes to the human race, we have reached the Damaged Goods Department; every single human being has something that isn't quite up to the Manufacturer's specifications. You have minds that won't open, mouths that won't shut, backbones that won't hold firm, knees that keep jerking, stiff necks that won't yield. Jesus warned His disciples pain and persecution, criticism and complaints, disgrace and even death, would accompany their efforts to go out and serve as His representatives in the Damaged Goods Department that is this world. However, in His final words to them in the chapter, Jesus promises rewards, rewards that would transform His disciples, rewards that would extend out to others, rewards that would elevate and not further captivate, rewards that would come not because of what is in peoples' wallets, but because of what is in their hearts.

For when it comes to real rewards, the question is not "What's in your wallet?" but "What's in your heart?" And sometimes the best way to see what's in someone's heart is by watching how they treat and/or receive others. Frederick Collins once wrote, "*There are two types of people: those who come into a room and say, 'Well, here I am!' and those who come in and say, 'Ah, there you are.'*" James D. Miles: "*You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him.*" Ann Landers echoed the sentiment: "*The true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good.*" On a semi-related note, Johann Wolfgang Goethe: "*There is nothing in which people more betray their character than in what they laugh at.*" You can get a pretty good indication of someone's character when you see if they laugh AT, rather than WITH, people. Another by Goethe: "*A person places themselves on a level with the ones they praise.*"

So, what's in your heart? In today's reading, Jesus intimated you can tell what's in a person's heart by the way they treat His disciples. He promised rewards to those who treat His representatives well: He said (1) *"Those who receive you receive me, and the one who receives Me receives the One who sent me."* Two implications here are that those who receive you because you represent Jesus also receive God Himself, and the kindnesses you receive AND the kindnesses you give will be rewarded. (2) Anyone who receives a prophet or a righteous man because he is a prophet or a righteous man will receive a prophet's or a righteous man's reward, and (3) if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is Jesus' disciple, he will not lose his reward.

We all enjoy rewards. We all need some kind of simple "reward" on occasion to lighten our load. Sometimes it is the smallest of rewards that can give us the biggest boost. If we are truly acting as Christ's representatives, if we are going out in mission and ministry for Jesus, we will inevitably find ourselves resisted by some element of this world. No good deed goes unpunished, as the saying goes. Sometimes when we bend over backwards, we get pushed over. Sometimes when we reach out in love, we get third degree burns. Sometimes when we turn the other cheek, that one gets hit pretty hard, too. It's at such times that we really need someone or something to bring a moment of refreshment into our lives; it is at such times a "cup of cold water" goes down really, really well. And if nobody is forthcoming with any such refreshment, well, sometimes you just need to reward yourself! Go buy yourself a big slice of blueberry crumb cake at Felicia's, or go get yourself some flowers to put on your table, or even take in a movie. In short, give a cup of cold water to yourself! But while doing so, also determine to take time and effort to refresh others, to reward others, to appreciate others.

An implication of these words of Jesus is that all of us are called to "welcome" and refresh His representatives. Keep a look out for friends or companions or co-workers who are suffering through a real dry spell, especially if life is going well for you today. Offer them the cup of cold water, the "reward", of a genuine word of appreciation, of a "thank you," offer them the refreshment of encouragement, offer them the "pick-me-up" of praise. Too many people go to bed thirsty at night ... thirsty for a thank you, thirsty for some recognition that you're working as hard as you can, thirsty for some encouragement. Offer a cup of cold water. Circulate rewards freely. Let us all become reward entrepreneurs, persons who are always hard at work at being creative to find ways to make somebody's day and refreshing others just because they belong to Jesus.

Jesus also promised a reward for those who received a prophet because he was a prophet; they would receive a prophet's reward. At first glance, this might not seem like much of a reward ... if you are familiar with your Old Testaments, you know that prophets got kicked out of their homes, swallowed by whales, suffered exile, were ridiculed, dismissed, and persecuted, some beheaded, some sawn in two, some stoned. But here's a short list of genuine rewards received by prophets and those who receive them: Dynamic encounters with God. Divine explanations about what is happening. Secrets from God. Dreams. Revelation. Contacts with Angels. Extreme times of joy. Wisdom. Peace. Direction. Understanding God's plan.

And there are rewards for those who welcomed "a righteous person" not a self-righteous person; that's another sermon. Welcome those who are doing right, welcome those who are encouraging and promoting what is right and good and true and beautiful. Welcome them, encourage them, cheer them on, receive them into your company. Now, there is a sense in which righteousness is its own reward. When we manage to do something right the sweetness of that moment is its own reward, but that sweetness is enhanced when others recognize it, welcome it, encourage it. Whether it is successfully re-wiring a lamp, or managing to get the dinner on the table without calamity, or speaking up at just the right moment, or keeping quiet precisely when you should, there is that glorious moment of "rightness." It feels good to do good; it feels good to do well. But it also feels good to have your "right-ness" recognized, appreciated, affirmed, encouraged. When you do that, you welcome a righteous person.

I could go on, but let me close with the story of a Sunday School teacher who couldn't open the combination lock on the supply cabinet. She went to the pastor for help. The pastor started turning the dial of the combination lock, stopped after the first number, looked up serenely toward heaven, began moving his lips silently, turned to the next number, repeated the process of looking up and moving his lips, then turned to the third and final number, opening the lock to the cabinet. The teacher gasped, "I'm in awe of your faith, pastor." He grinned, and then replied, "I have to be honest. The three numbers are written on a piece of tape up there on the ceiling." Sometimes things are startlingly simple when you know where to look.

Sometimes the Christian faith is startlingly simple, really, when you know where to look. It is essentially two "numbers" written on a "piece of tape" in these verses just read: *Number One: When You See Jesus, You See God.* When you see Jesus, you see God. "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me." In the life and teachings of Jesus and in His resurrected presence, we can discover everything we need to know about God and His ways. *Number Two: When You See Your Neighbor, Look for Jesus.* Ask yourself this question as you interact with people: If this person was Jesus, how would I treat him? And then act accordingly. With respect, with consideration, with compassion and with caring.

And more often than not, that is an accurate barometer of what's in your heart.