Sunday, October 8, 1989
BEING FAITHFUL IS ENOUGH
Luke 17:5-10

The sermons for the past several Sundays have been based on some of the more difficult parables of Jesus. Today's parable is no exception.

Jesus asked his listeners to put themselves into this hypothetical situation: "Suppose you had a faithful hired hand who worked each day in the field doing his job responsibly and faithfully. He doesn't cheat you, even though he works alone with no supervision. He doesn't take extra coffee breaks or take a nap in the shade. When he comes home to your house in the evening, you do not say, 'Come and sit down and have supper.' No, his work is not yet done. It is his job then to prepare the evening meal and serve it. After that is finished, he can eat his own supper and take his rest." And then Jesus asked this rhetorical question—"Do you thank the hired hand for doing what he is supposed to do?" "No," said Jesus. And then Jesus said to those around him, including his disciples (and now I'm paraphrasing), "The same should be true for you when you have followed my teachings and have carried out your ministry — a 'Thank You' or some other kind of reward is unnecessary and is not to be expected. Being faithful in doing what you are supposed to do is enough. It is a reward in itself."

The parable could be re-told this way: "Will the two-star General, visiting the Army barracks in West Texas, say to the Sergeant in charge, 'Here Sergeant, let me wash that floor; I notice it's not clean. Then let's sit down and talk about Army life'? Will the General not rather say, 'Sergeant, get to it'? When that Sergeant finishes his work, he will not expect to be thanked by the General but will realize that he has simply done his duty."

This parable is an especially important one for us to hear in these days when we seem to believe that we deserve extra rewards or credits for carrying out the responsibilities that are ours or for doing the job we agreed to do in the first place.

Some Christians even anticipate an extra bonus for living the life that Christ expects them to live. People think they should be paid a bonus for being responsible moral human beings, for doing what they are supposed to do, for doing their duty. In fact, to some, "duty" has become a bad word. It implies dullness or drudgery. This parable is saying "duty" is a good word and that there is an inner joy that comes from doing one's duty.

In a book entitled I Was Just Wondering, Philip Yancey writes about an experiment in integrated housing in Oak Park, Illinois, a near suburb of Chicago. Ernest Hemingway, who grew up in Oak Park, once described his hometown as a "Village of broad lawns and narrow minds."

According to Mr. Yancey, Oak Park, sometime in the near past, devised a cash merit system to reward citizens willing to try integrated housing. It worked like this: If you owned an apartment building occupied by members of one race only, you could earn a $1,000 bonus by letting the village help you select your renters. They would seek out minority families to move into all-white housing, and white families to move into all-black housing. The planners hoped that such incentives would make it desirable for landlords to integrate their properties.

Yancey said this law reminded him of a fair housing proposal playfully suggested in Harper's Magazine over a decade ago. The author of that article said, "Let's face it, appeals to morality

and high ideals never convince Americans to change their behavior patterns. The only way to produce change is to make it financially worth our while. Then you'll see some action." The article then went on to present a national program far more sweeping than Oak Park's. What would happen if Congress passed a law granting a $4,000 annual tax deduction to any family who lived next door to a member of a minority race?

According to the article, the Federal Treasury could actually save money by dismantling far less effective fair housing programs. And overnight, the free market would work miracles of racial reconciliation. Property values would rise, not fall, when a community integrated, thus making minorities the most sought-after residents. Advertisements like this would appear in local papers: "$1,500 cash to any Black or Hispanic family willing to move to the 700 block of Conwell Street. Will pay all moving expenses. Free prizes from local merchants."

Would the most hardened bigot be able to resist such a lucrative cash incentive?

Oak Park was in the news again some time ago when former President Jimmy Carter made a fundraising appearance there on behalf of Habitat for Humanity, a Christian organization devoted to helping provide housing for the poor. After the fancy banquet, Mr. Carter showed up in a run-down neighborhood in Chicago, in overalls, and worked as a carpenter along with others to help rebuild dilapidated inner-city houses.

As I mentioned in a previous sermon, Habitat for Humanity offers a different approach to housing problems than that experiment in Oak Park. The organization operates not in affluent suburbs but in run-down areas hidden away in aging cities and towns. Participants don't receive cash bonuses; rather, volunteers like Jimmy Carter work long hours without pay. The poverty-stricken families who are going to live in the renovated houses work alongside these volunteers, building up "sweat equity." No one realizes any investment gain or tax savings. In places like Chicago, committed Christian couples move into the neighborhood, offering role models for the poor and bringing social stability to the area.

They don't expect any "Thank Yous" or special bonuses from God or from anyone else. Doing their best to follow Christ's way is a reward in itself. They would say what Jesus said at the conclusion of the parable: "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

I don't know about you, but when I was growing up with my brothers and sisters (there were seven children) on a small farm where there were always endless chores to be done in the house and outside as well, we children were assigned certain work to do simply because we were part of the family that lived there. We were taught early on not to expect pay or some other kind of reward for everything we did. If we did our job well, then the reward was built in — the satisfaction of knowing that we had done our duty.

All of us seven children made better-than-average grades in school, but we were not paid to do so. We knew that we were expected to do our best, and the joy came from knowing that we had done our best.

This parable then makes two main points; we've already been talking about the first.

Doing what God has equipped you to do; doing your duty in your family, in your daily work, in your volunteer work at the church or in other places is a joy in itself. No special "Thank You" or recognition is necessary. In a church like this one, Sunday Church School teachers, choir members, ushers, TV volunteers, greeters, individuals who serve on Church Boards and

Committees — all do their jobs, carry out their duties in a responsible fashion, not because of any reward they are expecting or for the recognition they get, but for the joy of doing the job itself.
To carry the theme further, being a moral, upright, responsible, and caring person is what is expected of us as Christians, and it is its own reward.

Listen to what one man wrote about his care of another human being: “Adam is a 25-year-old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without much help. He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact; his back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy, and despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling sound. On occasions, I’ve seen one big tear roll down his cheek.”

“It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spends most of the day with therapeutic exercises.”

This is what Henri Nouwen wrote. He moved from his post at Harvard University to a community called Daybreak, near Toronto, to take on the daily, mundane chores just described. He is describing his ministry to a young man who is considered by many a vegetable, a useless person who should not have been born. Yet Nouwen insists that he, not Adam, is the chief beneficiary in this strange, misfitted relationship.

From the hours spent with Adam, Nouwen concludes that he has gained an inner peace so fulfilling that it makes most of his other, more high-minded, tasks seem boring and superficial by contrast.

A reporter wrote: “My career as a journalist has afforded me opportunities to interview diverse people. Looking back, I can roughly divide them into two types: Stars and Servants. The stars include NFL Football greats, movie actors and actresses, music performers, TV personalities, and the like. These are the people who dominate our magazines and our television programs. We fawn over them, poring over the minutiae of their lives: the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the aerobic routines they follow, the people they love, the toothpaste they use.”

“Yet,” this reporter went on, “I must tell you that in my limited experience, these, our ‘idols,’ are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met. Most have troubled or broken relationships and are on their third or fourth marriage. Nearly all are incurably dependent on psychotherapy or drugs or both.”

“I have also spent time with servants. People like Dr. Paul Brand, who worked for 20 years among outcasts — the poorest of the poor, leprosy patients in rural India. Or relief workers in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or other such places of world-class human suffering. They work long hours, for low pay and no applause, ‘wasting’ their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated, but somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them.”

The reporter went on to say, “I was prepared to honor and admire these servants as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them. They have received the peace that is not of this world.”

If you asked them, they would say what Jesus said at the end of the parable we are considering today: “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

I think in the same way of parents who do a responsible and loving job of raising their children from birth on up. Those who are good parents do so because of the joy in doing it and not because they expect any thanks in return nor do they expect their children to pay them back one day. They say with joy, “We have only done what was our duty.”

We know the Gospel is Good News when we experience the deep joy that comes from simply doing our duty, from carrying out our responsibilities as best we can.

The second point Jesus wants to make with this parable is also Good News. We are reminded once again, as we are in so many other places, that God’s love is not earned by what we do. It is freely given. It is God’s nature to love.
If you do your duty because by doing it you expect to earn God’s love, you have misunderstood the nature of love itself. Love that has to be earned is not love. On the other hand, you might be inspired to do your duty because you already know that God loves you. And to know that is enough. Amen.