Sunday, October 8, 1995
DOING WHAT GOD EXPECTS US TO DO
Luke 17:5-10

One of the more provocative books I've read recently is titled Punished by Rewards, with the subtitle, The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes, by Alfie Kohn.

Mr. Kohn argues that our basic strategy today for raising children, teaching students, and managing workers can be summarized in six words: "Do this and you'll get that." We dangle goodies — from candy bars to sales commissions — in front of people in much the same way we train the family pet.

Mr. Kohn's thesis is that while manipulating people with incentives seems to work in the short run, it is a strategy that ultimately fails and even does lasting harm. He contends that our workplaces and classrooms will continue to decline until we begin to question our reliance on a theory of motivation derived from laboratory animals.

In his book, the author goes on to demonstrate, using hundreds of studies, that people actually do inferior work when they are enticed with money, grades, or other incentives. Promising rewards to children for good behavior can never produce anything more than temporary obedience. Furthermore, he claims that the more we use artificial inducements to motivate people, the more they lose interest in what we're bribing them to do. According to Mr. Kohn, rewards turn play into work and work into drudgery.

Mr. Kohn also argues that rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin — and the coin doesn't buy very much.

It's not my purpose in this sermon to convince you one way or the other on this subject. I mention this book primarily because the parable Jesus told, which we heard earlier, deals with a similar theme.

Jesus asked his listeners to imagine 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 nap in the shade. It's also part of his job description to prepare the evening meal and clean up afterward." Jesus continued, "So, when he comes to your house in the evening, you do not say, 'Come and sit down and have supper.' No, his work is not yet done. His job now is to prepare the evening meal and serve it. Once he's finished with his work, he can eat his own supper and take his rest."

Jesus then asked his listeners a rhetorical question: "Do you thank or reward the hired hand for doing what he is supposed to do? No!" Jesus went on to say (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. Doing what God expects you to do is its own reward."

I heard a seasoned Army veteran retell this story in 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 only done his duty.”

Is it possible that many of us who claim to be followers of the Christian way count on an extra bonus for living the life that God expects us to live? Should we expect a special reward for being responsible human beings, for doing what we are supposed to do? Sometimes it almost appears that “duty” has become a bad word. It implies dullness or drudgery.

Last month, when Cal Ripken Jr. exceeded the record of Lou Gehrig for the number of consecutive baseball games played, he did so not for the acclaim he would receive, but because he loves playing baseball and it’s his job. Or think of the countless people who, day after day, show up for work on time, do their job with skill and to the best of their ability, and expect no special reward.

This parable is saying “duty” is a good word and that there is an inner joy that comes from doing what God expects us to do, and an even greater joy in doing more than what God expects us to do — especially when we do it in secret so that no one can know, and therefore, we cannot receive a reward.

As I was reading and studying the meaning of this parable this past week, I wondered what Jesus would say about an experiment tried in Oak Park, Illinois, some years ago. Philip Yancey writes about it in his book, I Was Just Wondering. Ernst Hemingway, who grew up in Oak Park, a Chicago suburb, once described his hometown as a “village of broad lawns and narrow minds.”

In an effort to get more integrated housing, here’s what Oak Park tried, according to Mr. Yancey. 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. Minority families would be sought by the village to move into all-white housing, and white families to move into all-black housing. The planners hoped that such incentives would make it profitable for landlords to integrate their properties. Whether or not it met with much success, Yancey doesn’t tell us.

However, he said it reminded him of a fair housing proposal playfully suggested in Harper’s Magazine a number of years earlier. The writer 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 writer went on to propose 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 — and to keep it fair, a $4,000 annual tax deduction to each minority family if they lived next door to a white family?” Property values would rise, not fall, when a community integrated. Would the most hardened bigot be able to resist such a lucrative incentive?” What do you think?

How far can rewards go in changing an individual’s character? I’m not sure. In this parable, Jesus implied that doing your best to follow in Christ’s way is a reward in itself. We are to do what God expects us to do because it’s the right thing to do.

That’s what I appreciate about the “Habitat for Humanity” approach to providing better housing for those who cannot afford it. Participants don’t receive cash bonuses. Volunteers work long hours without pay. The families who are going to live in the houses work alongside the

volunteers, building up “sweat equity.” They don’t expect “thank you’s” or special rewards from God or anyone else. Doing their best to follow in the Christian way is a reward in itself. They would say what Jesus said at the conclusion of this 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 on a small farm where there were always endless chores to be done, both in the house and outside, we children were assigned certain work to do simply because we were part of the family that lived there, and we each had our jobs to do for the good of the whole. We were taught early on not to expect pay or some kind of reward for everything we did. If we did our job well, as we were expected to do, then the reward was built in — the satisfaction of knowing that we had done our duty.

The parable then makes two main points. We’ve already been talking about the first one, but let me repeat it.

First, doing what God has equipped you to do, doing your duty in your family, in your daily job, in your volunteer work is a joy in itself. No special “thank you” or recognition is necessary.

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus was not saying that we who benefit from your good work should not express our gratitude. Telling people “thank you” is always appropriate. The point is that we who do our duty are not doing it because of the gratitude we hope to earn and receive. We do it because we know it’s the right thing to do. The parable is dealing with our inner motivation for doing what’s right and what God expects us to do.

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, 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. 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 unusual relationship. From the hours spent with Adam, Nouwen concludes, 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.

On the same theme, here’s what a seasoned 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

minutia of their lives: the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the people they marry and divorce, the toothpaste they use."

"Yet," the 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 lives and use 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 and they do not want or expect any honor or reward."

If you asked them about any reward, 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 of parents in the same way who do a responsible and loving job of raising their children from birth to maturity. 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 someday. They say with joy, "We have only done what God expects us to do."

The second point Jesus is making with this parable is more good news. He wants us to remember 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 what God expects you to do 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 what God expects you to do because you already know that God loves you. And to know that is enough. Amen.