Sunday, October 4, 1998
BEING FAITHFUL IS ITS OWN REWARD
Luke 17:5-10

Many of the teachings of Jesus go against common sense. If you do not believe this, read once more the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And then read again some of the parables. The one we heard today is a good example. Here's the story in contemporary terms.

Suppose you had a faithful worker on your farm or in your business, and this worker did 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 contract to prepare the evening meal at your home. So, when he comes to your house in the evening, you do not say, "Come sit down and have supper." No, his work is not yet done. After he has finished, then he can eat his own supper and take his rest.

Then Jesus asked this rhetorical question, "Do you reward the worker for doing what he is supposed to do?" "No," said Jesus. And then he said to his disciples, "The same should be true for you. When you have followed my teachings and carried out your ministry — a commendation or some other kind of reward is unnecessary and not to be expected. Being faithful in doing what you are supposed to do is enough. It is a reward in itself. You have the satisfaction of knowing that you have served God and others."

One Biblical scholar retold the parable this way: "Will the two-star General, visiting the Army barracks for inspection in West Texas, say to the Sergeant in charge, 'Here Sergeant, let me wash that floor; I notice it's not clean. Then we'll sit down and talk about army life?' Will the General rather not say, 'Sergeant, get to it.' When the Sergeant finishes his work, he will not expect to be rewarded by the General but will realize that he has only 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.

There are Christians who even anticipate an extra bonus for living the life that God expects them to live. People think they should be given a special commendation for being responsible moral human beings, for doing what they are expected 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 that "duty" is a good word, and there is a deep sense of satisfaction that comes from doing one's duty or going beyond what is expected of you.

Several years ago, 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 or to set a new record but because he loves playing baseball and it is his job. Not long ago, he missed playing a game on purpose so that people would know that he was not playing to set a record that would be hard to break by someone else.

Think of the countless people who, day after day, show up for work on time, do their job to the best of their ability, and expect no special reward.

This parable is saying that “duty” is a good word and that there’s a deep sense of inner satisfaction that comes from doing what God and others expect us to do.

That’s what I appreciate about the people who donate their time for Habitat for Humanity. Participants don’t receive cash bonuses. Volunteers work long hours without pay. They don’t expect any recognition. They don’t expect special rewards from God now or in the life hereafter. They would say what Jesus said at the conclusion of this parable: “We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty.”

They are like Mother Teresa, who did all her work among the poor not because of the hope of any reward or recognition. In fact, she was embarrassed and surprised by her fame.

The parable then makes two main points. We’ve already been talking about the first one, but I want to restate it for clarification and emphasis.

First, doing what God has equipped you to do — doing your duty in your family, in your daily work, in your volunteer work, in being of help to others — has its own satisfaction and reward. It’s built-in. No special “thank you” or recognition is necessary.

In a church like this one, Sunday Church School teachers, choir members, ushers, TV volunteers, greeters, board and committee members, those who volunteer to answer the phone at the reception desk — all do their job, 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 inner satisfaction of being of service. The same is true of countless community volunteers — those who work on the United Way campaign, deliver “meals on wheels,” and work as volunteers in hospitals and countless other service agencies.

An important requirement in our Confirmation curriculum is that each student work a certain number of hours in various service projects.

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 or recognition we hope to earn or 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 of us.

Fred Craddock, in commenting on this parable, said: “Jesus came among us as one who serves, and so are his followers to be servants. There is no place or time, therefore, at which the disciple can say, ‘I have completed my service; now I want to be served.'”

In other words, being a moral, upright, responsible, and caring person is what is expected of us as we travel on our journey through life, and it is its own reward.

Here’s what one man wrote about his care for another human being:

“Adam is a 25-year-old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without 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 up 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. Nouwen, who died several years ago, moved from his prestigious teaching position at Harvard University to a community called Daybreak near Toronto to take on the daily, mundane chores just described. Nouwen had previously been on the faculty at Yale Divinity School.

He was describing his ministry to a young man who was considered by many a vegetable, a useless person who should not have been born. Yet Nouwen insists that he, not Adam, was the chief beneficiary in this strange misfitted relationship.

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

Nouwen’s experience reminded me of a reporter who said, “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 ‘idols’ are as miserable a group 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, with 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.”

The reporter could have added that if you were to ask them, they would say what Jesus had the servants say at the end of this parable: “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”

I put into the same category faithful parents who do a responsible and loving job of raising their children from birth to adulthood. 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 satisfaction, “We have only done what was our duty. We have done what God expects us to do.”

The second point Jesus is making in this parable is to remind us of God's grace. It's as old as the gospel itself. God's love is not earned, nor is it a reward for your goodness. It is freely given. It is God's nature to love. If you are doing what God expects you to do in an attempt to earn God's approval, you have misunderstood the nature of God and the nature of love. Love that is given as a reward 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.

To know that is enough. Amen.