

The Reward We Don't Need to Get [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Romans 6:12—23; Matthew 10:40—42

I've been watching some of the competitive matches of the World Cup, which is this massive tournament, sponsored by the *Federation Internationale de Football Association*; and while enjoying some great displays of skill, my thoughts have occasionally drifted to the times I've played soccer and the times I've coached soccer without that great skill. From junior high through my first two years of college I kicked the ball around, and to this day, for my efforts I have in my possession the *Coach's Award*, given to me for being coachable. Later, as our two boys grew up, I became the coach and I remember how every child—ages 4, 5 and 6—would receive a trophy just for participating. And I was glad for the chance to hand out those prizes, and to see the expression on their beautiful little faces. Where are they now? I bet most of them don't play soccer anymore. But, in pondering today's gospel reading, I wonder if they still feel rewarded for the effort.

The essential theme of Matthew 10:40—42 is one of hospitality. Before they heading out on the road and venturing into all the towns and villages, Jesus wants his disciples to know that somebody along the way is going to welcome them. It's not just going to be sheer drudgery and persecution. Somebody's going to say, "You're welcome"—***YOU ARE WELCOME***—and when they do, Jesus declares they will not only be exposed to the transformative love of God; they will have received what he repeatedly calls "***a reward.***" And here's the most compelling part of the whole deal: "***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.***"

Now pay attention to how that's phrased. I don't think it's a mistranslation. The reward isn't something *TO GET*—to achieve or to work toward as a token of 'Look at what I did!' Somehow the reward is already there, in the proximity of those who greet these "*little ones*" with a cup of cold water. It won't be lost. Moreover, it's the same reward, reciprocally available, to everyone involved: "*Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward*"—which to say, I don't have to be a prophet to receive a prophet's reward; I just have to welcome the messages that come to me through persons like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel. And—"*whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous*"—again, which is to say, I don't necessarily have to be the "*righteous person.*" Morally-speaking, I could have a lots of issues. But if I'm at least curious and open to the possibility that a righteous person has come close—somehow I already have the reward.

I remember one of the most welcoming experiences I ever had took place in Siliguri, India, behind a barbed-wire fence, in this compound, where I was preaching in front of these Hindi and Nepali-speaking people that I would never see again. They were total strangers. They were a crowd of smiling and jovial, but foreign looking faces. And one of them gave me a drink of water... while another one draped my shoulders with these strips of silk... and then there was my translator, *Matthias Subba*. I remember his name because he introduced himself in perfect English and then welcomed me with such intimacy, it brought tears to my eyes. Later, walking down a public street, he interlocked his fingers with mine and proceeded to swing both our arms in unison. Eventually, because my homophobia, I broke loose of his grip. But everything about the gesture seemed genuine and beyond the performance of some perfunctory duty.

Well then, please allow me to pass it on: ‘You’re welcome!’ YOU ARE WELCOME. And can you sense how REWARDING that is? I realize, of course, many around us won’t. The world at large, our contemporary North American culture, has conditioned us to compete for our rewards. And consequently, when we ‘get’ them, these certificates of achievement, these glittering trophies, these special recognitions, don’t really satisfy for long.

People Magazine tells the story of a woman who asked for some tap water, just some ordinary water from the faucet of the posh restaurant where she had paid for her gourmet meal. This was a five-star hotel restaurant in the Alps of northern Italy; and she didn’t want to buy the bottled water, or the mineral water, or the sparkling, fizzy water. All she wanted was what you can get at McDonald’s down the street, a small cup of cold water. And yet, since this was the Alps and the height of tourist season, the waiter said NO. The hotel owner said NO. And so, utterly offended, the woman sued for 2,700 Euros. She sued them because, she said, drinking ordinary tap water was a human right and natural resource. But the Supreme Court of Italy ruled against her—that Italian restaurants and hotels do not have to serve tap water on demand.

Now I don’t know what you think about the litigious situation, but it seems to me what Jesus is describing is very, very different from that sense of privilege. He’s talking with his disciples about the gift of welcoming relationships. And, if he’s talking about literal water, it doesn’t come from a modern-day spigot; it’s coming from a deep well, at the bottom of a hill, in the middle of a dusty village. It’s going to take some effort. And yet, it’s all gift.

Every Christmas time, as gifts are exchanged in our extended family, I'm usually reminded that I need to send a 'Thank You' note; and usually, with my spouse's prodding, I do. No problem. But once upon a time we received a note in reply, informing us that our card had come too late. And, you see, that makes me question the whole system of etiquette: *Have we turned the giving of gifts and rewards into some kind commercial transaction? Is saying 'Thank You' within a certain time-limit now a competitive sport? And are people only going to serve God and share the good news of Christ's love because we thank them for it? Does the church merely run on the fuel of you and I looking get some appreciation?* My answer comes from Jesus, who says, the reward's already been given—so don't lose it: ***"Truly I tell you—none of these will lose their reward."***

When Hurricane Milton hit near Tampa, Florida, in the little town of Manatee River, Pastor Maurillio Ambrosio, made the rounds, household after household: *"Do you need water? Do you need propane? What do you need?"* And for two decades this is how his entire congregation served the community—Christian and non-Christian—Hispanic, White or African American—by offering sincere hospitality to anyone in need. But then, one day, because Pastor Ambrosio had entered the country illegally, agents with the *Immigration Customs Enforcement* agency detained this husband and father of five when he was doing what he was checking in with a court officer, and verifying that he had committed no crime, what he was supposed to do. And today his once-packed church is empty as Pastor Ambrosio has been deported to Guatemala. Regardless. Regardless of where he lives and how he's separated from his family. Regardless of how we—the good citizens of the United States—feel about so-called illegal aliens—Jesus has a message: ***"Truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."***

And just in case anyone's upset that I'm getting political, I'm not. I'm simply welcoming the prophets and I'm inviting you to do the same. Don't we want to share in the reward? And would we say that we've already received that reward by doing what they say? Here's Jeremiah 7:5—7:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

Here's Ezekiel 47:22:

You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.

And this is Zechariah 7:9—10:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Now, I don't want to dismiss too lightly what I'm reading here. By reading these words and letting them penetrate my heart and mind, I'm welcoming them; and if I'm welcoming them, we share *the reward of the prophet*. And just for good measure, to show how far these rewards go, consider the thirteenth century poet Rumi, who's not a Christian, but who seems pretty open to the possibility that God might be making a visit any day:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning is a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,

still, treat each guest honorably.
[S]he may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.