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"Rewards"

Genesis 22:1-18 Psalm 13 Matthew 10:40-42 Romans 6:1-12-23

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 22:1-14

We've been following the exploits of Abraham and Sarah and how in her old age she was finally able to have a child, a son that she named Isaac, which means Laughter. This morning's passage calls all of that into question when Abraham is challenged to sacrifice his only son. As we will see, even though the challenge seems horrific and unimaginable given all that Abraham and Sarah have been through, Abraham's obedience and faith is rewarded.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 10:40-42

Earlier in chapter 10 Jesus gave his disciples their marching orders for their very first missionary journey. He's told them not to take any money or extra clothes with them. He's instructed them to depend on the hospitality of strangers for their food and clothing and shelter. He's warned them that they will not always be well received. Indeed he has warned them that they will be persecuted. He didn't sugar coat the situation they would be facing. He warned them that pain and persecution, criticism and complaints, disgrace and even death, would accompany their efforts to serve as messengers of Jesus. But here, in his final words to them before he sends them off he promises rewards, rewards that would transform them would extend out to others, especially to those who would welcome them.. Hear the word of the Lord from Matthew 10:40-42

Let's pray

Lord we thank you that you have welcomed us into your family. Help us to take these words to heart as we see to offer hospitality to those you bring into our path. Thank you Lord for this your word. Amen.

A Sunday school teacher was examining her pupils after a series of lessons on God's omnipotence. She asked: "Is there anything God can't do?"

There was silence. Finally, one lad held up his hand. "He can't please everybody." (1)

Jesus warned his disciples that they would not be able to please everybody either. They would not always be received with open arms. Sometimes they would be received with open threats. If they were not received they were to shake the dust off their feet and move on. However there would be some that would receive them. For those who did there would be great rewards.

A few years ago there was a series of commercials that featured a big hairy Viking who is the spokesman for the Capital One Visa card who at the end of the commercial demands to know, "What's in your wallet?" The Hairy Viking wants

to know if you have a Capitol One Card in your wallet so you can receive "Great Rewards!"

Every credit card company out there is trying to convince us that running up even more debt is a "rewarding" thing to do. If we just use their card for all our purchases we will be the recipients of all these wonderful "rewards." Discounted merchandise, frequent flyer miles, room upgrades, even cash back formulas, are all promised by various cards as our "reward" for jacking up our monthly bill. But for the most part, all those perks and presents are trotted out in order to draw our attention away from our ever escalating balances and the bank's interest rates.

A "reward" shouldn't suck your soul away. A "reward" should set your soul soaring. Jesus says there are rewards us for doing something as simple as handing out cups of cold water.

Last week, through our Vacation Bible School, we opened our doors to children from our community and their families. We sat down at tables and shared hot dogs on Friday and hamburgers and ice cream on Sunday. It is an annual week of extending hospitality I enjoy every summer--as I wrote this week 35 out of my last 36 summers.

Every day when I was leading the children in music for our Vacation Bible School kids, Ms. Ann Smith would bring me a cup of cold water...and a snack. When you're singing for 3 hours straight it's great to get a cup of cold water in the middle. I trust that Ann will be well rewarded. When she stands before the Lord on Judgment Day I imagine the Lord will say, "and for those cups of cold water you gave to your pastor in the Vacation Bible School of 2017....here's your reward.

On Friday I was at the Methodist Hospital in Houston to have a stress test and when I came down to the first floor I kept seeing employees walking toward me and past me carrying Styrofoam containers balancing a smaller styrofoam container that suspiciously looked like it might be hiding a hot dog. As I came into the lobby there were tables and tables of the same containers. The hospital was treating folks to hot dogs, I'm guessing in honor of the birthday of our Country this coming Tuesday. I wasn't sure if I was welcome to take one because I'm not an employee, but to my surprise a smiling staffer motioned to me to come and get one for myself. Now I was balancing Styrofoam. A hospital was offering hospitality!

As I made my way to a table I saw people eating and visiting and drinking water from bottles. I started looking for the tables with the water, but I couldn't see any. I asked another staffer and she said, "It's in the carton." Not only did I get a hot dog, I got a bottle of water. It wasn't cold and it wasn't in a cup, but it did help wash down that hot dog.

In our North American culture we tend to limit the hospitality we offer to a limited number of people--persons that we already know, relatives and a friends and maybe even church friends. But, in Jesus' time, hospitality was extended to whoever needed it--strangers and acquaintances alike. In fact, in its original form, "hospitality" combines two separate words--one meaning friend and the other meaning stranger. So, from the beginning of its usage, hospitality has carried with it the idea of making friends out of strangers. (2)

(This week Houston is rolling out the Welcome Mat for Chris Paul and maybe others as they join the Houston Rockets. (I wonder what's in his wallet.))

The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked this question: What was the earliest sign of civilization in any given culture? The questioner expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fish hook or grinding stone. Her answer was "a healed femur." The femur, of course, is the leg bone above the knee. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization. I would contend that it is also the first sign of the work of Christ in the life of a Christian. (3)

In Romans 12:1 the apostle Paul writes, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is our spiritual worship." Jesus sent out his disciples on their journey to be living sacrifices, subjecting their bodies to persecution, dependent on the hospitality of strangers in hopes of being well received.

In our passage from Genesis Abraham was prepared to make a sacrifice of his son Isaac, but God provided a way out through a ram in the thicket. Abraham's hearing God's call to sacrifice his son was unimaginable. What must have been going through Abraham's mind? What about Isaac? What did he think when he was bound and laid on top of the wood? It is described as a test of Abraham's faith but it was also a foreshadowing of God faith in us as God made the ultimate sacrifice of His son, Jesus-the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus sacrificed his life for us and in turn we are to living sacrifices for others and for our Lord.

A women's church group always bought Christmas gifts for one of their missionary families. After meticulously selecting the presents based on the family's needs, sizes and ages, the group gathered to pack them. That's when another member whisked in and plopped an almost-new man's coat on the table. It was given to her husband and he didn't like it. As she turned to go, she suggested that maybe one of the missionaries could use it.

Some of the ladies were upset. Giving away something someone didn't want wasn't exactly a "sacrifice." The coat wouldn't fit anyone in the missionary family.

Obviously, the woman hadn't given much thought or time to the project. But the other presents didn't completely fill the barrel they were packing. So someone folded the coat and stuck it in. It made perfect packing material.

After Christmas, a thank-you letter arrived from the missionary family. They thanked the church for their many gifts and especially for the "miracle" gift. It seems that, during a storm, a destitute man knocked on their door. He was so ill-dressed for the cold that they invited him to stay until the storm had passed. Even though their visitor would have no gifts in the barrel, they decided to open it anyway. That's when they discovered the coat. It fit the man perfectly.

James Snelling, of Richmond, Virginia is 72 years old. Every single morning, unless the weather is very bad, James stands at the corner of Maple Avenue and Bremono Road there in Richmond, and what he does is he simply waves to the passing motorists, waves 'good morning' to them. He has become a kind of self-appointed ambassador of goodwill on that corner, and every day at 7:15 he's there and he stays until 9:00 A.M.

Because he's not as spry as he used to be, he has to often use his cane as he stands there. In an interview, James said that women are generally more generous in responding to his greeting than men are. One day he counted 180 women who waved back and only 75 men. James went on to say, "You know, I just do it for the fun of it, and what I have found is if you are nice to people, welcoming to people, they respond to that and they are nice in return."

Now that's such a simple kind of thing, isn't it, but how profound that is. Hospitality is simply the ability to make another person feel welcome in a sincere kind of way. In a lonely world where people are rushing to one place or another, these busy motorists were made to feel welcome in the world by this man who stood there on the corner waving to them - someone who dared to break through that barrier of isolation and dared to offer a sign of hospitality. (4)

A cup of cold water, a surprise hot dog, a re-gifted giveaway coat, a morning wave—those are things all of us can do. Those are small gestures to be sure—but Jesus said, "He who receives you receives me." In offering small acts of kindness the person is really doing a LARGE act of receiving the good news that all are welcomed into God's family through the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Mi casa es su casa. Mi iglesia es su iglesia. Mi mesa es su mesa. My house is your house. My church is your church. My table is your table. In a few moments we will share in celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. We do so having been baptized with water. We share in this meal knowing that we have been welcomed into the family of God and as such are enjoying the hospitality of not strangers but of friends, brothers and sisters in Christ.

May what we do IN this place be a way of repaying our Lord and our friends for their hospitality. May what we do FROM this place from this day forward be a way of responding to God's call on our lives to be a living sacrifice and to offer a welcome to all who will come. If we do, we will be certain to receive far greater than anything that would fit in anyone's wallet. We will not only receive a prophet's reward or a righteous man's reward but EVERLASTING ...rewards.

Let's pray. Lord, how blessed we are. You have poured out your love and mercy upon us. Thank you for providing for us, and to calling us to share your love with others. Thank you for each family you have brought to us, and for every person that will come through these doors. May your peace be upon each and every one.

As we leave this place of sanctuary and safety may we, like those first disciples, do so ready to share what we have experienced, to share your love with others in hope that they too will receive what we have from you. May we not be daunted by rejection but persevere knowing that we one day will receive our ultimate reward—your welcome home to us in eternity. Until then may we continue to experience your peace this day, and may the peace of Christ be with us as we seek to be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to You.

(1) Cowherding Christians, by Gary W. Houston

(2) James W. Cox, The Minister's Manual, Harper,

(3) Margaret Mead

(4) Outreach: You Never Know Who the Stranger at the Door Might Be by Andrew R. Wolfe