

Payback Time?

Matthew 10:40-42, John 15:18-21

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

June 29, 2008

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We had a profound theological moment at church earlier this week. The Cross-Trainers staff was talking about the good points and the bad points of their day, and it appeared as though one group in particular had had a rough time of it. Adam asked the group leader, "What do you think would be a helpful way to get them to do the right thing?" And without blinking an eye, Nate said, "Oreos." Nate then went on to describe how he had, with some success, held the Nabisco delicacy out in front of his group, saying, essentially, "Look, you do the right thing, good things will happen to you." A wise behavioral choice gets you Oreos, a poor choice gets you grief.

How many of you believe that is true? How many of you believe that if you do the right thing, good things will happen to you?

Oh, we desperately want to believe that, don't we? We want to believe that life is fair and that good things happen to good people. We try to train our children to believe this. We say that we know this to be true.

But it's not.

Look at the world of politics. How many times in your lifetime has a decent, fair, just candidate been passed over in favor of a scoundrel who had more money or the inside track or was owed a few favors? What about the field of professional athletics, where many, many times the race goes not to the naturally swift, but to the one who has done the best job at hiding his or her cheating? Think about the arena of economics, where we see an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor – the people who have, get more; the people who are hurting, have less...

Time and time again when this happens, we protest. "It's not fair!" we cry out. "It's not right!" We acted shocked to know that many, many times the "good guys" do not prevail. We all know that it happens every day of our lives, yet every day so many of us are appalled by some miscarriage of justice or another.

Why are we surprised? Jesus, speaking to his followers in both John and Matthew, says very plainly, "Look – watch how they treat me. It will not be any different for you."

Jesus, perhaps the supreme example of someone who did absolutely everything correctly, was "paid" for his obedience by being beaten, imprisoned, and killed. And before his death, he promises his followers that they will suffer on his account. And, so far as we know, eleven of the twelve apostles died violently – only John lived to die of old age. They followed the Master, and it cost them.

And we say, “Yeah, that’s too bad. It’s a good thing that we’ve gotten more ‘civilized’ in recent years. Have we?”

There’s a special section of the wall at Westminster Abbey in London. It was dedicated in 1998, and it features statues of ten people who were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ – all people who died in the lifetimes of the people who are in this room.

Esther John was born and raised as a Muslim in Pakistan. At the age of 17, she met a Christian teacher who gave her a bible. She was reading Isaiah 53 and sensed the Spirit of God present and gave her life to Christ. She served in Mission Hospitals and became affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in Pakistan. She taught women how to read as she worked side by side with them in the cotton fields. As she did so, she shared the love of Jesus. On February 2, 1960, she was found dead in her bed, having been brutally murdered by her own brother. She would not renounce her faith, and so her family killed her to prevent her from talking about Jesus.

Janani Luwum was born in Uganda, and became a Christian at the age of 26. His desire to know and serve the Lord was so intense that by the time he was 32, he was ordained a priest in the Anglican church. When Idi Amin ruled Uganda with an iron fist, Luwum stood up to him and protested the Ugandan government’s policies of arbitrary killings and random disappearances. Shortly after this, he was arrested and charged with treason. He was bullied, beaten, and on February 17, 1977 he was shot to death, some witnesses say by Amin himself.

In 1980 the nation of El Salvador was in the midst of a civil war. On average, 3000 people died each month. Bishop Oscar Romero asked the church and other nations to intervene in the carnage. He publicly challenged the military, and the Christians in the military, about the number of cadavers that were clogging the streams and the bodies of the tortured victims that were simply piled on rubbish heaps. On March 24, 1980, he was killed by a sharpshooter’s bullet in the heart as he held up the bread during a communion service. At his funeral a week later, there were more sharpshooters in the crowd, and police estimate that between 30 and 50 more people were killed. For worshipping.

And yet, here in 2008, when I feel as though I’m not being taken seriously by someone, I remind them that they are speaking with *The Reverend* David B. Carver. When I am in conversation with people, I expect them to treat me better because I try to do the right thing – even when Jesus’ experience, the lessons from the early church, and the events of my own lifetime surely prove otherwise.

I’m sorry to have to break it to you, but if you do the right thing, you won’t always get a cookie.

So what do we do about this? How is the Christian community supposed to hear these words of Jesus’, about being hated by the world and being mistreated just as he was?

At this point it is very helpful to turn to Matthew. And as we consider the words of Jesus in Matthew, let me point out to you that the Gospel of Matthew was, so far as we can tell, written by and for a community of Christians who were trying hard to live like Jesus. Presumably the disciple Matthew had begun to teach a band of primarily Jewish Christians the Way of life in Jesus, and they were experiencing some opposition from their families and the community as a whole. Matthew, wanting to instruct his community, reminds them of these words of Jesus. As he does so, he presents three ways in which we can respond to the fact that the world is not always kind to the people that God sends.

First, we are called to be hospitable. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you”, referring to the disciples who were sent out. Yet when Matthew is writing this, the audience is people who are receiving disciples, right? If the world is not going to be kind to the people who follow Jesus, at least the people who follow him ought to be kind to each other. Here, Matthew uses the words of Jesus to remind the People of God that we are called to be welcoming and grace-full to the people who come to us in His name.

Do we do that? When we see someone who comes into our midst, do we see that person as Jesus walking amongst us? Do we see the other people in this room – all of them – as those who bear the image of the King of Kings? Or do we see some as people we like and others as people that we wish would go bother the Methodists or someone else?

In addition to our calling to be hospitable, Matthew reminds his hearers that Jesus called those who proclaim the gospel “prophets”. That is a very helpful term, I think. It helps me to remember that not everyone will see things the way that I see them, and that not everyone is in the same place that I am when it comes to following Jesus.

Archbishop Oscar Romero – the man who was gunned down while celebrating communion – really understood this point. Not long before his death, he said,

It helps now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capability.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be

incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet can never forget that it is not about him (or her). The prophet always remembers that he or she is speaking to a truth that is greater. So if the world does not accept the message I preach, so long as I am faithful to the Lord, I have done all I can. The rest is up to God.

So we are called to be hospitable and to be prophetic. Let me make one last observation about Jesus' words in Matthew. It has to do with the last verse in chapter 10 – a verse from which many of us draw great comfort: the verse that speaks about giving a cup of cold water to “the least of these” or “the little ones”. The phrase there, *τουτων μικρον*, is used several times in Matthew to refer to humble Christians who are not church leaders, not church officers, but probably poor people who are new in the faith and probably new in the community as well. In reminding his community – and us – of Jesus' concerns for the people who come into the back of the room and wonder if they belong; the people who are on the fringes; the people whose absences are not always noticed and rarely matters of much discussion, Matthew is calling us to be vigilant in always reaching out to those who are at risk.

It's as if Jesus is looking at the disciples and saying, “Look, I know you're here. You're front and center. And I'm glad for that. But what about the young person who is leaving her family to follow me? What about the guy who is here alone – again – and wonders if he will find a friend in this room?”

How are we as a congregation doing with this part of Jesus' call? Do we tend to the “little ones” whose faith is fragile? Or are we more eager to spend time with our own little group? Do we call each other to a greater ability to care for the least of these? Or do we want people to notice us?

Practicing hospitality. Being prophetic. Looking for the folks on the edges of the fellowship. None of these are easy. Some of them can cost us. Some of our brothers and sisters have paid the ultimate price for following Jesus in this way. But that's what it is. It's following Jesus.

I may not get a cookie for doing this, but I'm going to try my level best anyway. I hope that you will come along, and that you will help keep me on the road. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Found various places on the internet, such as <http://www.justpeace.org/advent98-1.htm>