

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Mission: The Reward
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Exodus 12:33-39; Matthew 10:40-42

I was flummoxed. I read these words from Jesus over and over and had gotten nowhere. I read commentaries and looked at the root meanings of the words in them. All the commentaries either skimmed over these verses or said they were about supporting missionaries. Most of the word discussions were pretty perfunctory. None of this study helped me to make sense of what Matthew was trying to tell us in these closing words of Jesus' teaching about the mission. So I quit thinking about the text and went for a walk to try and clear my head, which is what I often do in these moments. And it was on my walk, that it dawned on me that I had been thinking about these verses like a good twenty-first century westerner and not as a first century Jew. When I changed my mental orientation, I realized that these verses are not about supporting missionaries, but they are a word picture, lodged within a cultural container. I realize that this may sound a bit, well, lecture-like, but bear with me.

In order to fully appreciate the word picture, I need you to do something for me. I need you to open your arms as if you are embracing someone. If you have someone to embrace, then do that. If you are by yourself, embrace yourself. Feel that embrace. Ok, you are experiencing the word picture. The word picture is that of embracing. Next is the cultural container. The cultural container is that in first-century Judaism, to welcome someone could mean to simply open one's home and feed someone or let them spend the night, but it could also mean ...and here's the key to understanding Jesus's words...to embrace both a message and manner of life. We can see this in Jesus' words "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward." And "whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous." The word picture is that of embracing the message of the prophet, meaning embracing God's justice for the world. Embracing the righteous person means embracing a just way of life, for that is what it means to be righteous. And the reward, which is mentioned in both passages, is that of being a citizen of God's inbreaking Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, when people embrace the message and manner of God's loving justice they become citizens of God's kingdom of heaven.

Now with those reoriented images in our mind, let's return to verse 42, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." The word picture is of others embracing the message about and the manner of living God's justice., which we are to live and share. And when anyone embraces the message and the manner, then they are embracing Christ. They are embracing Christ for it is Jesus who preached and lived fully the

justice of God's loving kindness. And when anyone embraces Jesus, they embrace the one who sent him, meaning they embrace God. By embracing God's message and manner of living justice for all, people embrace the beating heart of God. And when they embrace and are embraced by God, they more fully become citizens of God's kingdom of heaven come to earth.

It is this reality, that of helping others embrace the message and manner of God's loving justice so that they too can be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, that makes our mission so important. This is why we are called to continue this mission of striving for justice even when it is uncomfortable and controversial. This is why we are called to continue this mission even when it is not fashionable or trendy. We are to do so because it is the pathway to help all persons enter into and be connected with the heart of the living, God, so that they too can proclaim and embody the true nature of God, that of justice for all. My challenge for you then on this communion Sunday, is that as you take the elements, that you see in the bread and cup, the depth of God's love for all people, and God's redeeming love poured out for the world...then ask yourself, how am I continuing to invite people into God's loving justice and into the heart of the living God?