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Rewards

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On the first two days of classes for OU last year, a group of you let me join you in standing outside the church's front doors and offer free coffee and donuts to all who passed by on their way to work or class

Our mission was simply to welcome the new academic year and all the renewed activity it brings with it to our community. We were attempting to embody our presence as the Love of God in Christ, to be Christ's heart and hands to the OU community on the first days of the new academic year and to do what we could to help get the year off to a good start. It was a way to be present to our community, and to remind our community that we are ever so much more than a building.

Our reward for our efforts was primarily rejection. Most of the people did not stop for coffee and a donut. Some ignored us. Others politely declined. A fair number avoided us completely by crossing the street.

Some students rewarded us by challenging us, confronting our presence by asking what we were selling, demanding to know what we really wanted. One young woman told us we could give her all the coffee and donuts we wanted but would never influence her to change her faith. When we replied by saying our intention wasn't to change anybody's faith, we just wanted to help the academic year get off to a good start, this same young woman asked us to tell her about the Episcopal Church and showed a rabid curiosity for a denomination she had not heard of before.

A few asked us for what they needed most in that moment: directions to halls they could not find. And I am deeply grateful for the parishioners who knew where to send them and did so with easy to follow directions and encouragement. One student sat down with us for a few minutes, seeing our little table of coffee and donuts and enthusiastic followers of Jesus as a safe place for her to catch her breath and face her fears of starting college. Two young women came to us and said they were having a terrible first day of school, they had gotten lost, and although they eventually found where they needed to be, the kindness of a cup of coffee and a donut, if not a cold cup of water, were the best part of their hard day.

And there were the ones who thanked us, who called us names like awesome, whose spirits seemed to be lifted by our presence.

One young man tried to pay us for the cup of coffee we gave him, astonished that anyone would give something away without wanting something in return, for such action goes against the consumer culture that dominates our world and our understanding of what it means to be rewarded.

Dictionaries define the word reward as something given in acknowledgement of a job well done, or consequences for choices, or as a way to thank frequent customers with things like 10 cents off a gallon of gas, or a free merchandise, like how once at Kroger I got a free bag of candy simply for shopping there that day. But that definition only works in a consumer economy, and has unfortunately given the word reward a meaning very different from God's economy of love, which can be problematic when we try to live into our faith and ministry in our lives as individuals and as a parish.

When we hear words like what Jesus said in our Gospel today about being rewarded, it can be so easy to misinterpret his words to mean if we do what Jesus wants or what Jesus did or is like what Jesus did we will get freebies, or get what we want. We'll get things like more people in church and more money. But that is a consumer mindset, not a Christ-like one.

Our Gospel for today is the ending a long set of instructions Jesus gave his disciples when he sent them out into the People of Israel to show them the Messiah was in their midst, and if you remember the Gospel sections from the last few Sundays you might remember Jesus promised rejection as well as reception, just like Jesus received in other parts of the Gospel. Jesus' message seems to be anyone who dares to bring Jesus' message of love and healing to the world will receive exactly what he did. Today Jesus ended his long message by saying it won't all be rejection and pain; his followers will also receive rewards.

But I'm not sure Jesus meant followers of his will have the equivalent of their own punch cards where we get free stuff after doing a certain number of good deeds, or a Christian discount at gas pumps. Part of what Jesus showed us in the Mystery of the Incarnation, of his coming to earth, is what the economy of God looks like, and it is not a rewards program, at least not in the consumer sense. It is a different kind of reward, one where when the love of God we followers of Jesus try show is received by someone, their reception may require us to do something more. Such as the persons who accepted our coffee and donuts and then asked us to listen to them when they told us about their day, or join them in conversation when they asked what we really wanted.

I learned this lesson that the word *reward* means something different when you follow Jesus in one of the C.S. Lewis' books in his Narnia series titled *The Horse and His Boy*. It is an exciting adventure about a boy who runs away from a sad

situation with a Talking Narnian Horse to help the land of Narnia and in the process, finds his true home as a prince. Towards the end of the book, as the boy is riding his Talking Horse till the Horse can't run any more, the boy realized he would have to leave the Horse behind and run himself to find the person he needed to alert of a rapidly approaching danger. In that moment, C.S. Lewis, who is easily one of the best Christian apologists of the 20th Century, described what the boy was experiencing was a growing maturity with the words: "He had not yet learned that if you do one good deed your reward is usually to be set to do another and harder and better one." In other words, doing one good deed does not mean that is all there is and you get a prize if you did it right; instead that one good deed can open a doorway for deeper engagement, or a next step.

While this might sound draining and exhausting, as if more and more will be demanded of us when we try to follow Jesus, those of us who gave away good will as free coffee and donuts those first few days of classes last year and those who joined me on Ash Wednesday in distributing ashes for Ashes-to-Go experienced that we might have been tired after ward, but it was not an empty kind of tired, it was the kind that comes from experiencing the Holy, the Presence of God. And perhaps that is another kind of reward Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel, that when we follow Jesus, especially when we go into the community, we are given what we need to engage the people we meet, to receive rejection with grace, the curious with grace, as well as the grateful, all with grace.

Grace is God's gift, and in God's economy of love, grace and love is never limited. Perhaps the gift of today's Gospel for us here at Church of the Good Shepherd this morning is the opportunity to reflect on the rewards we have experienced, the ways our ministries are growing into new opportunities such as the invitation to form friendships with a mission in Mexico and the invitation to partner with the diocese in finding new ways to embody the love of God in our community. If we look at these invitations through the lens of today's Gospel we can see them as rewards; not prizes for doing good deeds, but invitations to take a next step as we continue to grow together and grow closer to God, and ways God does indeed fulfill God's promises. Which means as we take the next steps in these invitations, there will undoubtedly be opportunities to embody Christ and to receive what Christ promises, rejection, reception, reward, and God's grace to encourage and strengthen us all. I'm looking forward to continuing to share it all with you.