

## A PROPHET'S REWARD

By

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Text: Matthew 10:40-42	Date: 6/29/08	#0829
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The title of VBS this past week was: God's Big Backyard. From that backyard we learned to serve family, serve friends, serve neighbors, serve community, serve Jesus. For many folks their backyard is a place of some privacy at least a place to BBQ to make a garden, to store the lawnmower and trash cans, to put up a volleyball net, to feed birds, to hold a party. But the thrust of the VBS theme was that our backyards keep growing, that in fact what we may think is our privacy is really God's domain. As far as God is concerned, his backyard is where we serve our family, we serve our friends, we serve neighbors, we serve the community and we serve Jesus. Such things often take place in our ever enlarging backyard that includes hospital, roadside, office, police station, classroom, playing field, parking lot.

One young child this week asked his mother: what does "serve" mean? How would you answer? After all, if you're talking tennis, serve means to get started; it means a certain way of hitting the tennis ball; his serve went 90 miles an hour. In this election year, children are likely to hear that the president serves a four year term. Christians, however, mean something very

specific by the word serve. At the very least it means to put ourselves at the disposal of other people as did Jesus.

That's not all serve means, but here's the challenge. What's more important: to know the definition or to put it into practice? Over the years of teaching the bible, I've often devoted time to word study. What do the words in the scripture passages mean? If we understood them the way they were intended, wouldn't that open up exactly what God wants for us? I still believe that's true, but along the way I've become fascinated by practice. Practice makes perfect we say. We learn by doing, we say. We'll learn what serving is, if someone shows us and invites us to practice it along with them. Finally we get the hang of it.

In our NT lesson, we heard Jesus say to his disciples: "whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." The challenge is the same. Can we put welcome into practice? Now if you happen to read this verse in the KJV, it goes like this: "whoever receives you, receives me." And if you read Peterson's Message, it goes: "Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me." This is the word study side of me coming out. In fact, I think we could substitute the word "serve" at this point, and it would make perfect sense: whoever serves you, serves me, says Jesus. And I would cite Jesus' famous parable at the end of Matthew's gospel; he lists practices such as giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, welcome to the stranger, care to the sick and then says: if you've done these things to those who are least in the kingdom of God, you've done them to me.

So, whether you prefer welcome or accept or receive or even if you're willing to take my suggestion and use serve, the proof is in the doing. What level of doing, then, would you say fulfills the basic point Jesus is making? If you say hello to somebody is that welcome? Is that enough? Or do your eyes have to add a non-verbal message, I'm glad to see you? If you then shake hands, is that important for the welcome: does that say: I'm glad you're here? If you give your name or say come sit with me in my pew: does that convey: you don't have to be a stranger here? If you say let me show you around and give a tour of the building and point out the bathrooms and the fellowship hall, does that suggest that you want the person to feel at home? If you introduce the person to your friends by name or say come with me to the fellowship hour or we're having a church picnic, I'd be glad if you came with us, does that send the message that hospitality is an important priority of Faith Church?

Jesus said: whoever welcomes you welcomes me. Or whoever serves you serves me. Or whoever puts themselves at your disposal puts Jesus at your disposal. Perhaps the real challenge is not so much creating levels of activity that taken in their totality add up to genuine welcome. Perhaps the real challenge is that at last this repertoire of practices repeated time and again becomes your style of life. In other words it is no longer an instruction by Jesus that we remember when he hear this passage read as a scripture lesson, rather it is who we are.

VBS is a program we've been putting on for quite some time. We've had a good turn out of children, of teen age helpers and of adult leaders and coordinators. We house VBS under the Christian Education Department. The down side of speaking in such terms is that it's very easy to compartmentalize our learning and say that VBS or Sunday School or Bible study is for children or the uninitiated. But the challenges we've been speaking about this morning, the challenges of practice, where do they fit? Do we ever master them? Do we ever reach a stage where there is no more maturing to be had in, say, welcoming or serving or any of the various practices on the Christian list? Are we not to be accountable?

Sometimes we use the term Christian formation instead of Christian education. We do that to emphasize the fact that we're always being formed in Christ; it's never finished. But when we've begun to make Christian practice our own preferred way to live, then in a sense we've opened up our backyard and pointed out that it's not just our private place its God's place: all are welcome.

We're doing two things this morning. First, we're receiving new members; second, the vision team of Faith on the Road is having its initial meeting. Welcome is often regarded like serving in tennis: simply about getting started. Then it's over with. But I'm saying that welcome goes far beyond saying hello to the new members today. I'm saying that as the church, the body of Christ, each of us is to serve and to be served as our mission statement on the front of the bulletin says. If following Jesus is

our vision, then inhabiting all the characteristics of welcoming is the path. Furthermore, if any one believes that serving or welcoming is misunderstanding Jesus, tell the vision team, because we've already heard it's a priority: not just the words but the deeds. We just need help in the practice.