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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 10:40-42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

What's in it for me? That's the mentality of our human nature. What will I get out of my education? What will I get out of this business deal? How much money can I make if I plant that crop or raise a different kind of cattle than the neighboring ranches?

There's nothing wrong with any of these questions. We need to invest our time and energy in ways that benefit our families and our future.

When we are feeling generous, we might also ask, what's in it for others, for my community, and for the people who will come after me? I was talking with some friends the other day about Lewistown and we were all so impressed with the ways this community rallies around important projects that benefit all of us.

We listed recent improvements like the skate park, the swimming pool upgrade, the 3-D mammography machine, and new shops filling in on Main Street that folks have been supporting even during this difficult time. This community votes in ways that support our schools and medical facilities. We understand that caring for our neighbors means that we benefit from a thriving community, too.

Today's gospel is the third section of a longer speech Jesus gives to the twelve disciples. As a reminder, he begins by telling them to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," that is, the Jewish people, their family, friends, and neighbors. Their task is to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near and to bring healing to those who are hurting.

Then, after warning of the challenges that lie ahead for those who accept this missionary call, he wraps it up with the words from today's gospel passage that seem to promise some sort of reward for their effort. It is tempting to ask, "What's in it for me if I accept Jesus' call to proclaim God's word and serve the world around me?" What does Jesus mean by promising rewards?

As he finishes his instructions for the disciples, Jesus is also instructing those who are listening—and those of us who are reading his words today. So we can read this passage through two lenses, as Christ's messengers who are sent out, and as those who will welcome our fellow missionaries.

Jesus said, "**Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.**" Now I'll be the first to admit that I was not a stellar teenager, but there were times when I made choices NOT to do something because I knew it would reflect badly on my parents. If we claim to be Jesus' disciples, our lives are meant to represent Christ to others. And Jesus said earlier in this chapter that we might be rejected precisely because we ARE followers of Jesus.

The other challenge is to determine how we might welcome others as we would welcome Jesus himself. The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah addresses that very thing.

Jeremiah was God's prophet and Hananiah was a false prophet, but God's people had a hard time knowing which one was speaking on behalf of God. Hananiah was proclaiming sunshine and roses. His message was that everything was going to be OK so the people didn't need to worry. God would fix everything.

Jeremiah told God's people that there were going to be hard times ahead. They had disobeyed God and it would be a long and difficult time before they would be able to go back to their homeland. Prophets don't always say what people want to hear, so we need to be open to the possibility that those we struggle with might be bringing us a word from God.

**“Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.”** Proclaiming God's word may mean speaking the truth about the brokenness in the world and our need for God's grace. That is not always a popular message. The prophet's reward can mean enduring rejection, just as Jesus did.

Lately we have been hearing about the brokenness between people of different races, in our country and around the world. Some would dismiss that message. I have heard some say statements like “I've never been a slave owner. I have worked hard for what I have. Why can't 'they'?” meaning blacks or Native Americans or other people of color.

I don't know what it is like to live as a person with darker skin than my own. I don't know what it is like to grow up in poverty. I don't know what it's like to be stopped by the police because I am a black male and have to prove that I am who I say I am.

I may not be able to tell who is a prophet of God and who is a false prophet any better than you can. But I can listen. I can learn from the stories and experience of others and see how God will move my heart to respond. A prophet's reward can also be the breaking open of our hearts to new understanding, and new ways to care for one another.

**“Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.”** Remember, in Matthew's gospel, righteousness is about being in right or good relationship with God and with others. God has claimed us as beloved children in our baptisms, and all we need to do is remember that!

In the covenant God made with us in baptism, we are sent out to build up the relationships around us, relying on God's commitment and care for us and for all people. Our welcome to those we meet needs to show that we see them as God sees them, as precious and loved by God, worthy of our attention and care, even if we disagree. The reward of the righteous is mutual respect, reconciliation, and healthy rapport with others.

**“Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”** We don't usually like to see ourselves as being in need, but the truth is, we all need a cup of cold water on a warm day. Some of the most generous people I know are those who have experienced real hardship.

People who have survived cancer, or who have lost a loved one to cancer, are usually the most dedicated to Relay for Life and other cancer research fundraisers. I have seen videos of social experiments where a person living on the streets of a big city is given food or money. Often, they share their gift with others who are hungry rather than keeping it all for themselves. Every one of our Stephen Ministers can tell you a story of a time when they needed to be cared for and they felt called to this ministry to do the same for others.

We are created in the image of our loving, generous God. Jesus came to the world to save us and all humanity when we could not save ourselves. As children of God we are rewarded with Christ's compassion. And when we acknowledge our own vulnerability and need, God moves us to care for the "little ones" as an extension of God's love.

Jesus sends us out to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near and to heal a hurting world. The rewards of the prophet and the righteous person and even the "little ones" are the rewards of the kingdom of heaven—rewards Jesus brought into the world, including the gifts of grace, mercy, forgiveness, hope, and new life.

The power of Christ's Spirit is at work in and among us as we live out our prophetic callings. Some rewards may not be known until the end of time, and still we do the work God sets before us each day.

Jesus' disciples and missionaries do not ask "What's in it for me?" We are called to obey, to speak the truth of God's commitment to the whole world, to serve our neighbors in need, and to welcome others in the name of Christ.

Besides, we have already received our reward in the waters of Holy Baptism—God's love that will not let us go.

Thanks be to God! Amen

## **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

Called into unity with one another and the whole creation, let us pray for our shared world.

God of companionship, encourage our relationships with our siblings in Christ, especially the Episcopal Church with whom we celebrate 20 years of our common mission. Bless our conversations. Shape our shared future and give us hearts eager to join in a festal shout of praise. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

God of abundance, you make your creation thrive and grow to provide all that we need. Inspire us to care for our environment and pay attention to where the earth is crying out. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

God of mercy, your grace is poured out for all. Inspire authorities, judges, and politicians to act with compassion. Teach us to overcome fear with hope, meet hate with love, and welcome one another as we would welcome you.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

God of care, accompany all who are in deepest need. Comfort those who are sick, lonely, or abandoned. Strengthen those who are in prison or awaiting trial. Renew the spirits of all who call upon you. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

God of community, we give thanks for this congregation. Give us passion to embrace your mission and the vision to recognize where you are leading us. Teach us how to live more faithfully with each other. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

God of love, you gather in your embrace all who have die, especially Loyd Bowen whom we will commend into your care and keeping on Wednesday. Keep us steadfast in our faith and renew our trust in your promise.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Receive these prayers, O God, and those too deep for words; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**