

Rewards

Jeremiah 17:5-10; I Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 16:19-26; Psalm 1 02-11-07

I am sure we have all heard the little one liner, “What goes around comes around.” I am also certain we have found ourselves repeating it to others. I guess we all think that it will offer some comfort when someone complains about the apparent unfairness of life. Unfairness that we feel has been dealt to us or others and that seems to go on without any justice being administered to people who have offended us in one way or another. We really would like to see others pay for any offenses they have committed against us. But, often we don’t. Life goes on as it always has. If we become bogged down in feeling sorry for ourselves because others appear to have escaped what we consider appropriate punishment for their misdeeds in life, we may become angry, bitter people. If we become bitter people we miss out on the joy life can bring.

Our Bible reminds us in many different ways and through many different ages that things, indeed, do come around again to bite those who have been mean, uncaring folks. Things happen in God’s time, which is rarely our time. We need to be patient and wait.

Jeremiah assures us that God is the one who has the final say in things. People who live upright lives will receive God’s rewards while those who do not will perish.

The reading for this morning comes from a section of Jeremiah that is considered a piece of “wisdom literature.” For those teachers who wrote wisdom literature, “wisdom was the ability to perceive the order of God in creation, the intelligence to act in accordance with God’s order and moral behavior that leads to well-being.” (Harper Collins Study Bible, p. 1146, note 17:5-8) Jeremiah puts this more simply, telling people that they need to trust in God. He also reminded those who happened to hear him that God tested the minds and searched the hearts of people that they would receive what they deserved.

We are human, and we find it difficult to trust fully in God and to turn our lives over to our Creator to order and provide without a little input from us. While we desperately want to believe that if we lead decent lives we will be rewarded, we are not so sure. So we tend to take things into our own hands to settle old scores and to make things right in our own minds. Whether we care to realize it or not, dwelling on the past and past slights or difficult events takes up a lot of energy and eventually becomes self-defeating. No forward progress can be made in our lives in general and in our spiritual lives in particular if we are bound on vengeance.

We live in a time of spiritual unrest. Many are going in different directions to find themselves spiritually and not necessarily through established religious systems. I have been on my own spiritual quest for many years while still remaining in the system of the Christian church. I have discovered that, while remaining true to my faith, I have been able to become a bit eclectic in adding bits and pieces from other systems in which I have found value for my life. In spite of a great desire to be settled completely in one place, I have always been one to open doors on new arenas of thought that might take me further in my quest to know and understand God.

The other day I picked up a little book I have had around the house for quite some time entitled, The Elements of the Kabbalah. The study of the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, is something I have been interested in for quite some time. It is in vogue right now with several Hollywood folks embracing it. It is a quest for understanding of the self and the place a person has in the world. This search is one that can also be found in Christian mysticism, in Buddhism and in many other religious forums.

The Kabbalah focuses on a symbol, the “Tree of Life”, as its basis. Such a tree is mentioned in Jeremiah and in Psalm 1. It is the tree that flourishes beside the water and that goes on to bear good fruit for God.

To fully understand the Kabbalah requires years of study and meditation on the part of the student just as does an understanding of our own Christian faith. But more than that, it asks for an integration and unity of all beings and all life. Through understanding that we all are part of one another and of creation, life can and will change for everyone.

We can only hope that as our world grows in wisdom of this kind there will be better understanding of our brothers and sisters. If and when this happens the rewards will be great but there is much to overcome.

The rich man in the little story of Lazarus, was far from grasping the fact that the poor man was his brother and someone for whom he should have had concern in life. He could not understand the bond all humankind shares.

Jesus used this illustration, for those who could and would hear, to underline the need we have to love our neighbors. Who would be more of a neighbor than a man living at the gates of a large house? Someone who would be passed by every day as the people who lived behind the gates went about their daily tasks. Someone who could be ignored as one of no consequence; as less than human or embraced as a brother. Lazarus was truly the rich man's neighbor. The rich man did not see the poor man at all during his earthly existence. He had no use for him.

After he died he began to understand that there should have been a bond between him and Lazarus. He discovered this as he suffered in Hades and saw Lazarus beside Abraham in heaven. He pleaded for a bit of water to ease his thirst. But he was told, "No." He had earned the place he was in and Lazarus had risen to his reward for a life lived in misery. The rich man then asked that his brothers be warned of what would happen to them. The response was that they had teachers to tell them the right way of life—they needed to listen to them and they would be spared his fate.

There was a message in this little parable for those would hear it and heed it. Jesus told many parables hoping to help others find their way to an eternal life such as Lazarus enjoyed. Had the rich man only studied the prophets he would have discovered the way to a more charitable life on earth and he would have gone on to a far more positive reward.

Our reading from Corinthians reminds us of what it is that will be ours if we learn and live the message of Christ. Sometimes it seems that Paul writes in a circular manner, which makes it hard to understand just what he is trying to say. When he gets to his final point, we find it is the assurance that Christ has been raised and is the first fruits of living a positive life. A life we are to emulate through ours. If we do we will journey on beyond this life in the presence of God.

I do believe this. Although I am not certain what the next step in the journey will be. I have always hoped it will be a time of greater spiritual growth and a time when I will see clearly what it is I only see dimly now. I believe in a God of love who would never consign any of God's children to a life of torment after this one. Do I think that somehow we account for our lives? Yes, I do. I am not certain how. I do not think God flips open a huge book to our special page and enumerates the many ways we have fallen short of what was desired of us. I have come to think that we make our own accounting, a far more difficult task. Do I believe we have the chance for reconciliation with God? Always, in this life and the next. Is there hope for us? Yes, as there was hope for those who heard Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul. There is always a chance to start life anew as long as we draw breath. There is always the opportunity to become Trees of Life planted beside flowing water that produce good fruit for our God. There is always time to work toward the rewards that will be ours if we awaken to the task before us to become people who love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and might and who accept and love our neighbors as ourselves always working toward a deeper understanding of our mission in this world. Amen