



*"Divine Rewards"*

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Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

It's that time of year again. Grade reports have gone out from the public schools. If your school's on the traditional calendar, then the report covers the first nine weeks, and if your school's on the year-round calendar, then the grade report covers the final semester.

It's also election time. In a few weeks, we'll be going to the polls to vote on the candidates who are running for office this fall, and to act on a long list of ballot issues. Soon thereafter lobbyists will be knocking on the doors of the successful candidates hoping for "payback," especially from those candidates whom they have had a substantial hand in electing.

It's also that time of year when most for-profit companies calculate and dole out annual bonuses based on individual and corporate performance. Some will receive a cash bonus, others stock options, and others will receive a combination of the two.

In each of these cases (schools, elections, for-profit businesses) and more, we have a strong sense of *quid pro quo* in our culture. We believe that there is—or at least should be—a direct correlation between the quality of work exhibited by an individual and the rewards that a person receives. If I do x for y, then z should happen.

We teach our kids that if they go class, listen carefully, take good notes, study hard, and prepare for the tests, then they will get good grades.

We expect that if we help elect a candidate whose espoused values and promises match ours, then they'll vote in a manner consistent with their promises, and we will be rewarded for helping to put them in office.

In the work world, we have been taught to expect that if we work hard, do our best, and contribute to the success of our employer, then we'll get a commensurate bonus at the end of the year—at least in the for-profit sector.  
Right?

Generally speaking, these are the expectations that we hold in our culture. But sometimes, subjects turn out to be harder than imagined, or teachers are found to be more demanding than expected, so that students don't end up with quite the grades they wanted. If student efforts are not rewarded, they may become frustrated and less dedicated to their studies.

Sometimes politicians don't come through on their promises. When this happens repeatedly, voters become disappointed, and politicians don't usually get re-elected.

When a company enjoys financial success, we expect a portion of that material success to be shared with employees. If this doesn't happen, the best managers usually go elsewhere, the rank and file form unions and go on strike, and the company's stock tanks.

These and other examples remind us that we have well-entrenched rewards systems in our society. Most of us understand how these systems work, and when expectations aren't met, consequences are meted out for individuals and organizations.

## II

As I read and reread today's gospel lesson this week, I couldn't help but think how counter-culture the rewards system was that Jesus espoused.

By his own admission, it was contrary to the rewards system of his day, and to the power structure that was closely related to it. By comparison, with the

modern examples I began with, we also see how contrary Jesus' rewards system is to our current systems.

According to Mark, James and John had been on the journey with Jesus almost since the beginning of his ministry. The trek had not been an easy one. There were many hardships along the way.

Presumably, the combination of the challenges that the two had endured, and the expectations they had learned from their culture caused James and John to wonder what was in it for them. Moreover, their growing expectations seem to have emboldened them to go straight to the boss and inquire about their anticipated bonuses saying, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

"What did you have in mind?" Jesus asked.

"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Rather than countering with a yes or no answer, Jesus explained that the two had no idea what they were asking for. In fact, Jesus said in effect, you have no clue how my rewards system works. Then he went on to explain that the worst was yet to come.

Now the other ten disciples overheard the conversation between Jesus and James and John, and they grew angry. No doubt, they had been pondering the same questions as James and John, but they had lacked the nerve to ask Jesus about their compensation.

To set the record straight, Jesus went on to explain that his ministry would overturn the rewards system and power structures of their day, and that anyone who would be great by divine standards would have to become a servant of all, and care for persons at the bottom of the “food chain” rather than “living high on the hog” themselves.

Now doesn't that thought just make us all want to say, “Sign me up, Jesus!”

### III

Gospel accounts like Mark 10 highlight the radical nature of Jesus' example and teaching, in his time and ours, and they help us appreciate what a miracle it is that the Christian church survived beyond the first century.

Yet, despite the controversial and demanding nature of Jesus' call to service, historians like John Dominic Crossan have argued that the first Christians did in fact take on this servant identity, and their witness was key to fact that we're here

today reflecting on Jesus' call to a life of service. (See *The Birth of Christianity* San Francisco: HarperSF, 1999.)

In modern terms, we would say that the early Christians walked the talk of service. They took in widows and orphans. They offered hospitality to foreigners. They cared for the sick. They buried the dead. They embraced Jesus' imperative to serve.

By Jesus' own statements, the rewards for service are not always clear, nor are they necessarily his to dole out.

Based on an amorphous promise like this, and the expectations that our modern rewards systems instill in us, it's a miracle that anyone signs up for service today. Don't you think?

And yet people of faith and humanitarians around the world, regularly commit themselves to lives of service. Why?

#### IV

Perhaps we serve because **this is what we were taught** by our families, our church, our school, and/or our social and fraternal organizations. No doubt each

of us can name one or more persons whose example of service taught us the value and importance of servanthood.

Marion Wright Edelman, the president of the Children's Defense Fund, and author of the book, *The Measure of Our Success* (Beacon Press, 1992) explains to her children and ours that, "Service is the rent we pay for living."

When I think about my own upbringing, I realize that service was central to the lessons I was taught. Both sets of my grandparents set the family standard for service at home, at church, and in the community. We learned from their quiet examples how to serve and the importance of service, and we were affirmed (or not) by how quickly and how well we assessed the needs of others, and how soon we stepped in to help without being asked.

I suspect that most of us in this room learned about service and its importance from our families, in similar ways, and this in part accounts for our commitment to service today.

Perhaps another reason we serve is because **we have been the recipients of service**, and we understand both the need to serve and the need to receive services.

In the small Midwestern farming community in which I grew up in, everyone understood the necessity of neighbors working together to ensure each others' wellbeing. Farm machinery was often bought in common. Labor was regularly exchanged. Neighbors helped each other. We all knew we needed each other to survive.

Last Sunday, I was pleased to hear one of our church families discussing our Youth Group's plans to support FESCO's Adopt-A-Family project. This particular family happens to have benefited from some of FESCO's services, and the mother was explaining to her daughter that by her helping with this Youth Group project she was giving back to FESCO and helping others enjoy some of the benefits that they had received in the past.

So there are several reasons that we serve. One is that this is what we have been taught. Another is that we experience service as a cyclical process.

I suspect a third is that we have more than a sneaking suspicion that **the rewards system which Jesus challenged wasn't actually all that rewarding, and that the power structure that he contested wasn't ultimately powerful.**

Dr. Paul Farmer is one of the best examples of a modern person who is suspicious of the conventional rewards system and power structure inherent in our culture.

Tracy Kidder profile's Farmer's life of service, as an anthropologist, scholar and physician, in his book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*, which has been on the NY Times Best Seller List. (New York: Random House, 2004.)

In his book, Kidder describes how Farmer's work began in Haiti in the 1980s, where he first completed medical anthropological research and later founded Partners in Health, a small community-based health program in the Central Plateau of Haiti.

Partners in Health's has since spread its operation to Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Rwanda, and Boston's low income neighborhoods of Roxbury and Dorchester.

By his own admission, Farmer is not a particularly devout Christian; nevertheless, his passion for service has been driven by a belief in what liberation theologians call the gospel's "preferential option for the poor." (See <http://www.pih.org/whoweare/index.html>.)

Kidder explains that initially Farmer's approaches to public health and problem solving were deemed too unconventional to be supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), his professional associations, or major foundations, but

through demonstrated results, Farmer has since earned the respect of these esteemed bodies, and substantial funding from the WHO, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

As grand as his professional recognition and funding successes have been, Farmer reiterates time and again to Kidder, in the book, that serving the poor is a privilege, and its own reward.

Kidder observes that Farmer also seems to have been rewarded with a kind of inner clarity that few people gain in life, and that this clarity has extracted a price from him. The price that Farmer has paid for that inner clarity, Kidder observes, is “perpetual anger or, at best, [unrelenting] discomfort with the world” (Kidder, 216)

Though most of us will never make the kind of impact that Paul Farmer has made on international public health, I think that Kidder’s description of Dr. Farmer is transferable to any of us as who tries to function effectively within the rewards system and power structure that Christ promoted. Like Farmer, we may be rewarded with inward clarity, but the toll we can expect for this clarity may be perpetual discomfort with the world.

For Paul Farmer, his discomfort with the world stemmed from his upbringing. He was the son of working class parents, who migrated from South Carolina to Florida seeking better jobs and a better standard of living for their family, but they

never actually achieved them. During most of his childhood, the family lived on a converted old school bus, and later on a converted fishing boat. His parents shifted from job to job as seasonal work dried up. Like many hardworking parents, they did whatever it took to put food on the table and to encourage their children to do well in school so that they would have a better life.

Rather than hiding from his childhood hardships when he earned admission to Duke and Harvard, Farmer mined his upbringing and the inward clarity that was fostered by his values system to make a lifelong commitment to understanding the perspective of poor people in Haiti and elsewhere, to unmasking the root causes of their illnesses and poverty, and to addressing and advocating for their wellbeing.

While there is much encouragement in our society to leave behind our personal hardships, I think that Farmer's example reminds us that there is value in remembering who we are and where we came from, and using our own economic, psychological, or other personal hardships as a resource that can sensitize us to the needs of others, and that can push us to understand other's needs from their vantage—not our own—and to work cooperatively to find creative solutions that foster the wellbeing of all of us.

Finally, I suspect that a further lesson we can learn from Dr. Farmer, and from today's gospel reading, is that the discomfort we experience in life, which results

from the incongruity between Christ's rewards system and political structure, is a sign that we are on the path of faithfulness. The good news for us in all of this is that we are not on this path alone. We go this way together, with Christ as our companion. Thanks be to God. Amen.