



“What’s in it for Me?”

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Hayward, California***

***Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 26, 2011
Mt. 10:40-42 (NRSV)***

Stephanie and I have lately been inundated with communications from every airline, restaurant chain, and rental car company with whom we have done business, and even some that we haven’t yet tried. (Perhaps you’ve had similar experiences too.) Each of these communiqués has attempted to entice us to do business with the sender by underscoring the benefits that each offers through their respective customer rewards program. Of course, these rewards programs aren’t quite what they used to be.

Before the Great Recession hit, many companies—particularly companies in the travel business—seemed in a race with each other to offer sweeter and better deals to capture an increasingly larger share of the market. As a result, those of us who were among their so-called “frequent fliers” came out ahead. Stephanie and I, for example, racked up a lot of “miles” during the days when we worked in the UCC National Offices, back in Cleveland. In those days, I typically flew three out of four weeks of each month, and Stephanie took several international trips each year.

I recall thinking how counter-intuitive it was to call a free airline ticket a “reward” when using that reward meant getting back on an airplane for the fourth week in a row.

Frequent fliers, for example, learn quickly that customer rewards programs are often not as rewarding as their sponsors claim them to be—especially since the Great Recession hit—and these rewards programs were redefined as a result of business losses and corporate mergers and acquisitions.

Meanwhile, the very people whom the program sponsors hope to curry favor with became disgruntled, because the beneficiaries have to see their “rewards” as entitlements, and felt slighted when the terms of the programs changed.

So, one of the negative effects of the Great Recession was that it exposed corporate rewards programs for what they truly are—incentives programs that fuel capitalism—rather than sincere expressions of customer appreciation. In return, corporations learned that they had created “monster consumers,” who no longer smiled and felt appreciated

when they received their rewards, but instead those same customers expected more “bennies” than before the recession hit.

Attitudes like this which beg the question, “What’s in it for me?,” would have been a cue for my grandmothers to expound on the evils of ingratitude, but interestingly, philosophers like the 17th Century Scottish economist, Adam Smith, argued that self-interest was (and is) good for business, and that our capitalist economy depends on self-interest to flourish.

II

Regardless of what you think of consumer rewards programs, or Adam Smith’s philosophy, I suspect that you share my view that Western cultural values foster a sense of self-interest and encourage us to frequently ask ourselves “What’s in it for me?” when we are offered an opportunity to participate in some activity or program.

Furthermore, given the pervasiveness of self-interested attitudes in our culture, Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reading couldn’t be more counter-cultural:

Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and 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.

Now on the surface, perhaps, Matthew’s passage sounds innocuous, but take a closer look, and we realize that verse 41 sounds more like a consumer product warning label, than a customer rewards program invitation. Notice how Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of prophet will receive a prophet’s reward...”

Hello! Think about what kind of rewards prophets received in Old Testament times. They weren’t granted a trip to Cancun or an extra night’s stay at Disney World for their loyal participation in God’s plan. No way. Prophets like Jeremiah were sentenced to forty years in Babylonian captivity, and others, like Daniel, were thrown in the lion’s den. Many of Jesus’ Disciples in the New Testament didn’t fare any better—remember the Christians against the lions in the Coliseum?

So, I say, “*Caveat emptor!*” (“Buyer beware!”) Jesus’ rewards program never was, and never will, be an incentives program to improve corporate market share in the travel economy or to curry customer favor. In fact, Jesus’ rewards program is a completely counter-market idea that invites participants to a very different way of being and living in the world than is espoused by the dominant culture.

Consider, for example, that things haven’t gotten any easier for the people who subscribe to Jesus’ program in the modern world. In Israel, today, “the righteous” are synonymous with the Gentiles who helped save the Jews from extermination by the Nazis, during World War II.

Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority) refers to those brave souls as “the righteous among the world’s nations.” The names of the righteous are inscribed on the walls of Israel’s national monument, which was built on the Mount of Remembrance located outside of the city of Jerusalem. To become familiar with the biographies of the heroes whose names are etched on these walls is to learn that many of the righteous went to early graves trying to do what only a few had the courage to do—that which was just and right in the wake of egregious evil.

When we read Matthew’s gospel through the lens of biblical and modern history, we realize that Jesus’ rewards program in many ways was anything but rewarding, and those who were (and are) paying attention hear Christ’s invitation to participation as a kind of spiritual call to arms rather than some cushy bonus program. Likewise, when we contemplate the contrast of Jesus’ rewards system and Adam Smith’s, we see just how wildly counter-culture Jesus’ ministry was in both the First and the Twenty-first Centuries.

III

The surprise, then, for me as a pastor and philosopher, is not that many people in our culture are driven by self-interest. No, the surprise is that some people are motivated by something other than self-interest. The surprise is that some people actually find meaning by engaging in projects that are larger than themselves, and that take longer than a lifetime to fulfill, and they do what they do out of a sense of motivation that is far beyond a desire for personal gain or self-gratification.

The type of people that I’m talking about are the kind of people who take phone calls from members of the Service Enlistment Committee at Eden Church, and who despite having full-time jobs, a spouse, two small children at home, and a family wedding in the wings, say things like, “Sure, I’d be honored to serve as moderator of Eden Church for the next couple of years. Thank you for asking.”

The type of people that I’m talking about—and the people whom we’re going to recognize today at the Annual Meeting, are the type of people who have co-chaired the campus renovation committee and then gone on to serve multiple years on the Board of Trustees and the Church Council—and for what rewards? I don’t think it was the six-pack of Corona or the homemade cherry pie that Service Enlistment came up with.

The type of people that I’m talking about—and the kind of people whom Jesus was fishing for—were not people who were angling for heavenly rewards. They were (and are) people who were intent on bringing heaven home to earth. They were (and are) people who feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the sick, teach the children, care for the campus, crunch the numbers, sing in the choir, welcome the newcomers, collect the offering, prepare the sacraments, take the minutes, and, oh—so much more.

Instead of contemplating their earthly rewards when the Service Enlistment members come calling, those who respond affirmatively and who serve the church and our community in volunteer roles do so, I think, because they have a sense of vocation and because they are driven by a concern for the common good. They are the kind of people

who see what needs to be done, and they do it quietly, without being told, and without an audience or the expectation of a reward. And they do it because they have learned over time that a job well done is its own reward. They have also learned that the ministry they carryout is the warp and woof of our life as a congregation, and that the *esprit de corps* that is created over months of fine-tuning church policies and enhancing the fellowship life of the community is one of the ways that they grow closer to God and each other, which is another way of saying “bringing heaven home to earth.”

So to the more than 50 volunteers who have served in one or more of the 15 governance groups in our church this past year (and years), we offer our heartfelt thanks to you, knowing that what you have done for our church and community wasn't done out of self-interest and earthly reward, but rather out of self-sacrifice and a concern for the common good—which is what Jesus' life and ministry was all about. Amen.