

**Lectionary 13 Year A 2020**  
**June 28, 2020**

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

One of the big issues as the coronavirus began to spread—and an issue that continues—is the expanded access to unemployment wages and increased benefits. People have been concerned that this will lead to more people not wanting to return to work when it becomes safe to do so. It also has affected the morale of those that continue to work—often working harder and longer hours, knowing that there are some people receiving similar earnings on unemployment. Some people say that those on unemployment don't deserve these wages because they haven't earned them, or that it simply rewards laziness.

This is because our society has been built on the principle that a comfortable lifestyle and steady wages are things that are earned from hard work. We work hard, believing our hard work will pay off: maybe it will lead to a bigger paycheck, maybe a promotion, maybe recognition from our superiors. We work hard hoping that we will earn a decent wage, that we will be able to do the things we want to do, and that we will be prepared for retirement. Our society includes in its narrative that those who work harder receive better wages. And even outside of our jobs, we work hard on our homes, in our gardens, and in our community. We work hard, and the expectation is that we will get what we deserve.

The problem is that this narrative isn't always true in reality. During this pandemic, we have watched as unemployment rates have skyrocketed, and we know that it can't be attributed to laziness. There are hardworking people that are unable to receive the wages they deserve. We also know that even in "good" times in our economy, there are plenty of hardworking people that are underpaid and overworked. No matter how hard they work in their chosen career, they are not paid what they are worth, and are unable to make a decent living for themselves and their families. There are people who have worked hard their entire life and still have no savings for retirement. And there are people who are unable to retire or who have been forced out of retirement just so they can pay their bills. In our world, not everyone gets what they deserve.

The gospel today tells us that if we welcome a prophet in the name of a prophet we will receive a prophet's reward, and if we welcome a righteous person in the name of a righteous person, we will receive the reward of the righteous. It seems to be that these are the wages for our work. When we welcome the prophet and the righteous person, we are repaid with the reward we deserve.

But what is the prophet's reward? Jeremiah, the prophet in our Old Testament reading today didn't have the greatest reward. After preaching submission to the Babylonians, repentance, and a return to the ancestral faith, his reward was that his own people accused him of lying and carried him away from the Promised Land into Egypt—where he prophesied that wrath would be poured out on them. That doesn't sound like much of a reward.

Earlier this week was the commemoration of John the Baptist. He was the prophet who foretold the coming of Christ. He was a great prophet, he baptized Jesus, had many followers, but what was his reward? He was sent to prison and beheaded. I'm not sure there are people lining up to receive that reward either. This "prophet's reward" doesn't sound so great.

But what about the reward for the righteous? The problem there is that we'll have a hard time finding someone who is righteous. Abraham, Moses, King David, Peter and Paul all had their flaws. In fact, every human has their flaws. That leaves us with only one person in all of

history—the one who is both fully human *and* fully divine, Jesus himself. And what was his reward? His reward, for all his righteousness, *was the cross*.

And so, 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. But these aren't exactly rewards that we're excited to receive. And it's hard to say that these prophets got what they deserved. Certainly we wouldn't say that Jesus deserved the cross. But *that* is the sinfulness of this world.

In a perfect world, everyone would do honest work, and receive an honest day's wage. In a perfect world, there wouldn't be unemployment or pandemics or a struggling economy. In a perfect world, a prophet would speak the word from God, and even if the message was unpopular, *people would listen*, and the prophet would be *cared for and trusted*. In a perfect world, the Son of God would come into the world, and rather than being crucified by his own people, he would be exalted and seated on a throne in all his glory.

But that's a perfect world. In this broken world, we earn our wages of sin. Sin gives us what we deserve. But Paul doesn't say that "the wages of sin is death and the *wages of righteousness* is eternal life". That's not it at all. Paul says, "the wages of sin is death, but the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

With God, we have the promise that we *won't* get what we deserve. Our sinfulness means that we deserve punishment and death. We can't earn wages of righteousness because we cannot be fully righteous. And when we look at the only righteous person in history, even Jesus didn't earn a reward. Certainly we, who are only made righteous by God, do not *earn wages* for our righteousness. But what God gives us, what God gives ALL of us, is a free gift. A free gift of life, when all we can earn for ourselves is death. "The wages of sin is death, but the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's gifts for us are free, and they are so much more abundant than some far-off life in heaven. Everything on earth is a gift from God. We can thank God for the gift of the ability to earn wages—for our jobs, for our projects, for our vocations. We can thank God for gift of the ability to enjoy our wages—for fulfilling our daily needs; for luxuries like cars, computers, and cell phones; for the ability to relax. We can thank God for the gift of retirement. We can thank God for the gift of families—for parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, extended family, and especially for the gift of children—for a life that God has entrusted to us. We can thank God for the gift of good friends and people to share our life with. Even when our activities seem limited by the pandemic, there is much for which we give thanks. We can thank God for our reputation, for hope, for faith, for all our spiritual gifts. We can thank God for all of our mental and physical abilities. *We can thank God for the very ground that we stand on.*

God has given us all these things so that we might have life, and so that we might have it abundantly and eternally. But the greatest gift that God has given us is God's *unconditional love* for this broken world in which we live. The gift of God's love that sends the righteous one to the cross for *our sake* and for *our salvation*. The gift of God's love that comes *to us*, without requiring works, with no need of being earned. God's love for us that comes to us in the gifts that God gives us freely and abundantly. The greatest gift is God's unconditional love for us that comes to us in the bread and in the wine that is Jesus' body and blood.

We don't deserve it. We haven't earned it. We're not as righteous as we should be. But God gives us abundant gifts for our lives *just because* God loves us. Thanks be to God! Amen.