

Praise's paradox

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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Nobody has to gossip about the secret virtues of other people. Most folks will let their good points show.

One of the differences between adults and children, however, is that adults do not do the right thing in order to be noticed or thanked. They do it because it is the right thing, and find satisfaction in doing right.

That's the theory, anyway.

If the theory is true, however, neither I nor the people I know are one hundred per cent grown up. As my daughter would say, "Duh!"

Of course, none of us is completely mature. We are more likely to do the right thing if there will be positive reinforcement for doing it.

Wise employers know that unexpected praise is a wonderful tool for maintaining morale and commitment in a staff. But it is the "unexpected" part that keeps the praise on an adult level.

This is on my mind because in the sixteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples not to work with thoughts of reward, but to think of themselves as "unprofitable servants," doing what they are supposed to be doing.

While in other contexts Jesus speaks freely of reward (and punishment), here he is emphasizing motive.

Modern translations say “worthless slaves” rather than “unprofitable servants.” That is a complicated idea. Involuntary servitude is abhorrent to our consciences. On the other hand, a path of service freely chosen can be a beautiful thing, if we let it be.

Willing slavery is a concept that pervades St. Paul’s writings. It grates against our way of thinking. Most of us feel free to join and quit religious groups on a consumer basis. If we like the product, we stay.

I do not see it that way. I do not believe that religious organizations are “voluntary” at all in the sense that other charitable organizations are.

The only reason to bother with religion, any religion, is personal commitment to its identity, beliefs, and mission. If we believe something is right, and that we are called to it, integrity requires that we serve it. If not, why bother?

When people tell me they are wondering whether they should stay in a particular congregation or even denomination, I cannot find it in my heart to try to manipulate their decision for the sake of numbers.

I usually want to say something like, “I value your presence and your participation very much. If you leave, we will miss you very much, but I understand you need to be where God wants to use your gifts and talents.”

I seldom had the sense that such a comment could be digested. I’d end up offering to talk it over. It became clear in most of those conversations that reporting a thought about leaving was the person’s way of saying that they felt undervalued – not underutilized.

So we have a paradox.

We need in our organizational life to hold up the value of selfless giving (altruism), while recognizing that few people can easily go on without recognition of their efforts at least some of the time. It is one thing for them not to seek praise. It is quite another for us to withhold it.

So how do we help each other mature towards selfless giving? Probably only by example. To be seen as one who gives praise but does not live for it could be in itself an act of religious commitment.

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