

Do the Hard loving thing

Sacred text: First, make me a small cake...

I Kings 17:13

There is a true story of a man lost in a desert dying of thirst. He came upon a shack and beside the shack an old well pump.

Desperately he pumped the handle but no water. He went inside to die and saw on a shelf a bottle with some water in it. He read the label which said: In order to pump the water, you must first prime the pump by pouring the water in the top of the pump. Then refill the bottle for the next person.

Now the man was in a dilemma. Here was precious water. Should he pour it away? What if it didn't work? Surely he should drink this? But there wasn't much in the bottle. Slowly he went out to the pump and followed the instructions. Then he began to pump and lo and behold abundant water came out. He drank it. He danced around laughing and laughing and then suddenly he remembered that he had to refill the bottle... the gift that had come to him had to move...

One Thanksgiving, in Knox Stratford, we had an idea that we should have the children in the service build a Horn of Plenty on the altar. All went well with the children placing fruits into the Horn of Plenty until we came to one small boy of only three years of age. When he got up to me, I saw how hard this was for him! His little fingers very slowly released themselves from around the pear he was holding. Slowly, very slowly, he gave me the pear for the horn of plenty. I think he wanted that pear for himself. I very much admired his struggle. I don't think at the age of three it is easy to give away anything. Experts tell us that that is the age when children start to say "That is mine and you can't have it!"

So, what I wonder today is this. Does it ever really get any easier to give things away?

In the Hebrew Scripture today, we didn't read of a plague like Covid-19 but of just as deadly a famine. We read of the woman who was starving and down to her last two sticks of fuel, last bit of flour and oil.

Incredibly Elijah asks her to bake **him** a cake *first* and then make something for her son and herself.

There were no supply chains for this woman or Supermarkets kept open with precautions. She was as helpless as the Mexican immigrants stuck at the border whose lives are at risk, or those fleeing the bombing in Gaza...

If we get into her shoes, even though the challenges are different for us, I'm wondering if we were down to our last two sticks and our very last carefully conserved meal, how receptive would we be to someone who asked to be looked after first?

In the Christian Scripture we read the story of the rich young ruler, who had lived a good life all his life. Jesus, sensing that this man's life was not whole, immediately puts his finger on the problem. He says to him "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and then you will have riches in Heaven and come and follow me." And when the young man hears this, he goes away with a heavy heart; for he was a man of great wealth.

Instead of a poor person being asked for all that they had, it's a rich person being asked for all that they had. But which is harder?

In relative terms to us, if we stood in history beside the man of great wealth, we might look pretty affluent with our cars, TV sets computers, I phones and I pads, our house, our second property, our stocks and bonds. But think about it just for a moment. Would we be willing to give it all up and give it to the poor? Surely we would have said "You are kidding!?! Right? No?" And we would turn away for we have great possessions too!

Scott Peck, author of The Road Less Traveled, says that **we have to be willing to give up the things we possess in order to grow spiritually. That is hard!**

But LIFE is about giving up isn't it? Let's think about that for a moment.

First of all, we have to give up being children who possess their parents' attention all the time. As teens we have to give up the idea that it is all about us. Then we have to make career choices. Two roads open up before us that diverge. Which shall we take? We can't do both.

We marry or not. If we marry, we generally give up other marital choices. Then we make a choice to have children or not. Either way we have to give things up. As our children grow we have to give up our authority over them and that can be a painful process.

When success comes our way, one day we will have to give up that dream job that we love, on which we have placed our identity. We become a successful farmer, bank president, shop steward, a local politician or one at the national level and even if we move into total denial, the day will come when we have to give it up.

Then the day comes when we have to give up physical agility. We lose our sexual attractiveness and attractive young men and women pass by us with never a glance, and we say "I used to turn heads! Whatever happened?"

Perhaps the day comes when we find ourselves almost if not completely dependent, upon others. They wait on us in extended care, in a retirement home. Ultimately, we have to give life itself up. Have you ever asked yourself why all this giving up?

There is I think an answer to that question and it is this: *At the most basic level of all, life is **a gift** to us.* As far as I know we didn't ask

to come to this planet. We find ourselves alive, and in this reality, not of our own volition. We are not our own idea. We don't create ourselves despite what some self-made people think. Life came to us as a gift WHICH WE DO NOT FULLY CONTROL and things like Covid remind us painfully of this, that sooner or later we have to give this physical gift back. We are like a book on loan in the library of life and we have a due date. We all have to die.

Now for a joke.

One year, a husband who was harried by his mother-in-law on a regular basis decided to buy her a cemetery plot as a Christmas gift.

The next year, he didn't buy her a gift.

When the mother-in-law asked him why not, he replied, "Well, the gift I bought you last year, you still haven't used."

Let's look hard at the facts of this life that we are given. We can never really own anything or anyone. A lot of trouble comes from trying to do that. Truth is we can't own property, we just get to look after it for awhile. We can control the *use of it* for awhile. **And how we do that determines whether our spirits grow more beautiful or not.**

Some people think that they own their spouse. I had one man who thought when he got married that his wife belonged to him. When she slept with another man, he got angry saying she is **my** wife by which he meant that she was his property. He said "I will kill that man."

However, owning another person simply does not work. The days of slavery are over. In our society marriage depends upon the free ongoing decision to love. Ownership in marriage is dysfunctional and destructive. Don't go there! Instead let's remember the gift,

that when our loved ones commit themselves to us freely, it is a gift **every day!**

Lewis Hyde in his book The Gift says that in great literature the person who tries to hold onto the gift, whatever it is, usually dies; unless they come to understanding first. Dicken's Scrooge clutches the gift as Marley did, and as he clutches, he shrivels up inside. Only when he understands that the gift must not stop with him, does Scrooge come to joy.

Think of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. *Keeping the ring of power slowly destroys the bearer of the Ring*. Hyde says that the passing along of a blessing is essential to the preservation of its blessed quality. In short, the gift must move and not get stuck with us.

Notice in the story of the widow what happens when she gives her last meal away. Power is released! And miracles happen!

Suddenly it is not just a widow and her son. Now there are **three** working on this problem and one of them understands what I am teaching today; That all of life is a gift that can be maintained only at the will of the Divine Giver, *and to understand that, is the beginning of our freedom*. The old story teaches us that the gift moves in ever widening circles, like throwing a rock into a pond making ripples that finally reach the shore. Why this phenomenon? Because underlying all reality is a law of the universe. The law of the universe is this: **the gift must move**.

Think of money. When money stops circulating everything slows and can even stop. The gift must move!

I have often wondered which is harder; to give away your last nickel or to give away immense riches? Perhaps it is easier to be neither rich nor poor, because if we give, it doesn't kill us and in

Tolkien's terms the fascination and hold of the ring of power and wealth is not yet upon us...

Was the Jesus of history's demand on the rich young ruler unreasonable? Many commentators think that this man could have become one of the 12 disciples. Perhaps another apostle Paul, a man whose words have changed history, contributed to wisdom, a man who passed the gift on. But instead, this young rich man disappears from the pages of history completely. Who knows what he might have become *if he had learned the lesson that the gift must move?*

On the personal level what happens when we move the gift along? *There will be an immediate release of power.* Moving it makes us happy, clutching it makes us sad, *and adds to the misery of the world.*

So why don't we move the gift?

It's the fear of losing something isn't it? We are like that little boy with the pear. He is not sure that there are more pears. And let me reverse Christian scripture for a moment *Perfect fear casts out love.* It shrivels up our hearts and there is no power, no freedom and eventually, no happiness as we clutch. Fear is never a matter of logic, for we all know, as the expression goes about wealth, that "We can't take it with us!"

Here's the truth. We are not our own source. God is source. And faith in the Giver of life is demonstrated best by the faith to give freely, to love people without strings attached and then like Scrooge to come at the last to joy. On Christmas morning Scrooge is a changed man. He is bubbling over with life and vitality and he is having fun sending the biggest Goose in the shop to Bob Cratchit!

The less we clutch, the more passes through our hands, the better we all are.

But to discover this truth it is necessary to understand fully the text with which we began; **First**, make me a small cake! In the worst situation you can think of, **GIVE anyway!**

Let me close with a true story.

A single mother was laid off and could not make her house payments. The bank foreclosed and her home was put up for auction. At the auction this single mom lost emotional control and began to weep at losing her home where she had had such wonderful memories. A woman noticed her weeping and came up to ask what was wrong. The single mom explained to this woman that she had lost her job and now her home was about to be sold.

The stranger asked which home it was on the list and the single mom pointed to the number.

The auction progressed and the stranger bid on the home. She had competition but she pressed on, raising her offer time after time. She finally bought the home and then found the single mom in the crowd.

She said; ‘I came here to buy a house for my son but now I realize that God sent me here to buy this house for you.’ She gave the ownership back to this woman who only moments before had been heartbroken.

“Make me a small cake, first.”

Lets prime the pump. Lets do the hard, selfless, loving thing. Lets partner with God, so that miracles can start to flow!

Amen.