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3rd Sunday of Advent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Give It All Away”

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Matthew 19:16-22

Then someone came to him and said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks, Be to God

Give It All Away

In her younger days, blogger Danielle LaPorte was a Perfume Girl, those young women who stand in the cosmetic section of department stores asking if you'd like a spritz of the latest designer fragrance.

Every day on her way to work at that high-end department store, she would see the same street busker outside the door playing for coins – a tall, dark, and willowy sort of man who played the accordion and sang Edith Piaf. He had worn-out sneakers and wore a bright red clown nose on his face. The dignity and humility of that scene broke Danielle's heart every single day.

"I couldn't take my eyes off him, but I could hardly look at him" Danielle remembered. "And so I never tossed him so much as a nickel... all those days, five days a week, for months."

Then she read a story about him in the community newspaper. His name was Marc, he was from France, and he was saving up money to celebrate Christmas with his family.

The thought of this strange and lovely man's story - a wife and children waiting at home for him, looking forward to Christmas - drew her in.

A few days later, it was almost payday, and she was down to her last ten bucks – just enough for a burrito and coffee on her break. As she headed out, Danielle finally mustered herself and walked quickly up to his accordion case. In a flurry, she dropped in a five dollar bill and kept walking. Then she made a sharp turn into the nearest alley, buried her face in her purse, and sobbed.

"I felt complicit in his humiliation" she recalled. "I felt ashamed of how many times I'd walked by without looking him in the eyes. I felt poor."

Danielle realized something in that flood of shame. She saw that sometimes we resist The Give because it hurts to meet the other in their place of need and suffering.

I could give so much more than I do. This is an uncomfortable truth that I've had to wrestle with in this season, and over most of this past year. I don't really know what stops me. Fear mostly. Like Danielle, we all probably hear the call of to give more in this season. We see faces and hear cries of need everywhere around us. But giving away what we have is scary. Sometimes it hurts. Even when we do give, there may not be joy in it.

There are times when giving actually makes us feel worse, when The Give only serves to highlight how much more we could be doing, how much deeper we could go, or reveals to us all those whom we still don't even notice,

and cannot bear to look at. Compassion fatigue often becomes the place where we live for most of this time of year: paralyzed by fears of scarcity and our own insecurity.

So it's completely understandable if, when we hear the words of Jesus in this passage, our hearts sink a little:

"Give it all away"

But we've worked so hard for it....

"Give it all away"

But how will we survive....?

"Give it all away"

But what if they don't love us in return..?

The rich young man in the story is like a lot of us. He wants Jesus to reassure him. He wants to be told that if he makes the right kind of sacrifices, if he is kind and respectful when he should be, if he knows the exact amount to make out on the check, then he'll be able to secure his everlasting soul.

But Jesus reminds him that these things are all fine, but by themselves, they don't go far enough. Each of us must give up that which is the most precious to us. We must give until we actually feel something – until it hurts.

That may not mean the same thing for everyone. For the young man in the Gospel story, it was his money and his possessions. But to read this passage and believe that it only applies to those who are materially wealthy would be a mistake.

It's not really even about the young man's riches. His wealth just happens to be his protective wall – that thing in his life that would most likely separate him from God and the people around him. Jesus understands that this is what keeps him from being truly vulnerable, keeps him from meeting others in their suffering.

We all have something that we hold back, something that we reserve because we believe it protects us and keeps us from being vulnerable. Maybe it's money, but

maybe it's love, or creativity, or courage, or our voice in a crucial conversation. Whatever we are holding back for ourselves, the message from Jesus in this text is the same:

“Give it all away”

To travel the journey of faith requires us to give it all away: our possessions, our security, our hearts and minds - all that we are, and all that we have, even when it's scary, and it hurts, and we know deep down that we're going to regret it. We are called to let go of whatever is protecting us because those same things often stop us from encountering the very Spirit of God, which is present all around us.

God reveals Godself to us in the risky places where we dare to give away everything that keeps us secure and separated from one another.

Paul tells us in his letter to the church at Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord. Do not worry about anything.”

Maybe this is the kind of joy that Paul was referring to, not the lighthearted joy of parties or presents that we so often associate with this time of year, but the deep transformative joy of connection that we can only experience when we give something of ourselves away. This kind of joy requires us to stand in the presence of God and one another unbound by those things that get in the way of a relationship.

Imagine what might have happened in Danielle LaPorte's story, if that Christmas she had not simply tossed a five dollar bill into the young father's music case. What if instead of avoiding the pain she saw in that young man's plight, she went straight toward it – took her burrito and her coffee and sat down on the sidewalk next to him and shared her meager feast? What if she had looked into his eyes? What if they'd had a conversation? How might both of their lives have been transformed at that moment?

The call to us in this season is to move closer, to stop avoiding the pain, and draw nearer to each other. This is what God in Christ has done for us. This is what we celebrate in the Advent season.

God came near.

God became one of us in order to stand with us in the good, but especially in the bad. God gave it all away – for us.

Poet Steve Garnass-Holmes expresses it in this way:

Every year he says, "I love these people. I'm going to go be with them, just to walk them through the darkness."

Every year the angels tell him, No, this is a bad idea. It never works.

But the Eternal One nods at him and smiles a sad little smile, and he pours himself out into a great mysterious emptiness, and he comes to us.

He always comes and walks with us and then he is taken. Every year, taken:

shot beside me as we walk, jailed, deported, lynched, crucified.

and I say, "The angels are right, this doesn't work." He nods and smiles and says,

"Yes, it does." And then once again, the angels shaking their heads but singing glory anyway, he comes to us. Knowing, he comes to us, every year And I, a tiny light in a great emptiness, I am already waiting for him.

Amen.