

Giving Embraces the Promise

Isaiah 50: 4-9

Mark 14: 1-11

In my Life Mapping class at the prison, one significant strategic change I've made to the curriculum is to pair up two different emphases, one on getting and one on giving.

I came across a passage written by Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner as he was writing about God's calling, life's purpose, and personal joy. He wrote: *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.* Most people, whether inside or outside of prison, are sure that life is about **getting**. We spend great energy making sure that we are getting what we want. Some folks never get past their infatuation with getting. In any case, it seems we're stuck on **getting** long, long, long before we're ready to set any priority on giving.

What Buechner clarifies God's intent for your spiritual blessing to come in giving yourself where the world needs you, where God needs you in his creation. Your gladness, your joy, your passion, will not come from a job or from a thing or from a person. It will come from giving yourself away with gladness, joy, and passion for the one in need.

When sharing this with my students. They seemed very confused at first, and then as we talked about it, they seemed to come away with a sense of joy. I have my surly student, a rather difficult fellow who is about my age and has been in prison for nearly 20 years. Previously, he had said that his purpose in his life outside prison – with release coming in another year or so – would be in complete commitment to his family. His dark piercing eyes glared at me when I challenged his assumption. I reminded him that after 20 years of him inside, his family had gone on with their lives, his kids were grown, now living their own lives. He would be like a stranger, an alien in their midst. By expecting *them* to bring *him* meaning in life, he was setting himself up for rejection and disappointment. He needed a life map of his own that was independent of them. He needed to have his own life and be ready to live it.

That brought him back to life's purpose in a job. He had no career or training prior to entering prison, although prison had equipped him to some woodworking. At his age – late 50s – with no real skills and no work history for the last 20 years, getting a job would be challenging enough, but finding life fulfillment in whatever that job might be was unlikely. He was pretty grim.

When I shared the passage from Buechner, stressing the two halves – *your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger* – he was just as confused as the others. When we talked about how he understood the "world's deep hunger," what problem in the world he would most want to see dealt with, he continued to look at me like I was speaking Greek. After we finally defined the things he wanted to do **to give**, he could then see how giving was the better part of getting, and a big smile broke out. The best *getting* comes from giving. In giving, one receives a sense of personal worth and empowerment. It says that I matter as an individual; I contribute, heal, make new, offer hope, and give

witness to the best things of Jesus in my own life. In his case, he could see himself woodworking as a paying job, and woodworking on a Habitat house or in some other endeavor where he might contribute his skill, or he might simply share his time, his attention, his compassion. In his case, the change in facial expression was the most profound. Yet most of the students had the same sense of joy when they realized their plan, their life map, was not only about getting, but about giving.

Last week, we had talked about the potlatch, about how hard it would be to give away or even destroy our most cherished possessions. This week takes us further into that notion of giving, into its depths.

The passage from Second Isaiah is the third and final section of the so-called Suffering Servant passages which began in the preceding chapter. In our passage, the text has shifted from the words of the Sovereign Lord to the affirmations of the servant.

What we find upon close examination is the difference between the heavenly kingdom and the worldly empire. The prophet, the Suffering Servant, is the perfect one to expose the ugly contrast.

The Sovereign Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, to know the word that sustains the weary. In the context of God's decision to move against the worldly empire, against Babylon, on behalf of his people in exile, the tongue that sustains the weary bears the word of healing, hope, and empowerment; it comes from the heavenly kingdom.

The worldly empire has a different word for the weary. It is "work harder, lazy and shiftless, deserving the lash." The weary one is not sustained, but demeaned and then menaced. If this servant cannot serve the worldly empire, then the servant is expendable; get rid of that one and get another who can work. What the prophet has been given by the Sovereign Lord is the word that lifts up and sustains, a word in opposition to the worldly empire.

The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears. The servant listens to the word from God, the teachings of the heavenly kingdom. The word is not always what the servant **wants** to hear. This word demands obedience and it expects personal sacrifice. The servant therefore responds by noting, *I have not been rebellious, I did not draw back.* Faithfulness to God's way is weighed against the radical demands placed on the servant.

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. It is not simply a matter of listening and then teaching. Those actions are subversive to the worldly empire. As the worldly empire is based on power, wealth, and order, the heavenly kingdom is anchored in justice, righteousness, and peace. Acting in obedience to the Sovereign Lord and the heavenly kingdom puts the servant in opposition to the worldly empire. The empire doesn't tolerate subversives. The servant admits to 'offering his back to those who beat me, and his cheeks to those who pull his beard; he does not hide his face from mocking and spitting,' because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be

disgraced. With a face ‘set like flint,’ the servant has no concern about being shamed or about enduring whatever the empire throws at him.

In fact, the servant can imagine the court room. *He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!* What is the source of the servant’s pugnacious confidence? *It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me?* Let them try. Let them do their very best. Let them persist and come back again and again with all that they can muster. The result: *They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.* The more they try, the more they’ll fail.

The servant has fully given himself to the Sovereign Lord, to his mission to teach and sustain God’s people as they strive and struggle to remain faithful in the face of the worldly empire that would oppress, condemn, and exploit. The servant’s life is all about giving, and his service is to the promise of God that overcomes the greedy, grasping, consuming oppression of worldly empire. In the work of God through the servant, we see once again God’s priority of care and compassion for the weak, poor, and vulnerable, bringing them justice, righteousness, peace, and new life.

Seeing the mission and the sacrifice of the servant who is scorned even while he gives himself to the promise in service to God, we can also appreciate the story in Mark 14 of the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume on the night of his arrest.

Chapter 14 opens with Passover only two days away; the chief priests and leaders are plotting. They know enough about Jesus to be very anxious. This wandering preacher has been very popular in the countryside, always saying defiant things. Jesus just entered Jerusalem with quite a bit of fanfare, and the manner of his entry, riding on a donkey, was clearly chosen to indicate his messianic mission. Connect the dots and it’s clear that this Jesus of Nazareth is going to be trouble. The religious and economic elite of Jerusalem need a plan. In fact, they want to be ahead of events, and be in a position to work events to suit *their* agenda.

Let’s not forget that these same religious and economic elites are entirely dependent on the occupying forces of the worldly empire. They serve the empire, its power, its wealth, and its demand for order. Jesus, this servant of the Sovereign Lord, is an obvious threat whose good news of the heavenly kingdom stands in direct contradiction to the good laws of the worldly empire.

Jesus is visiting a man named Simon the Leper when a woman comes in and starts pouring very expensive perfume on his head. It is an anointing in the same tradition that has the prophet **anointing** the head of the King of Israel. You catch the symbolism, right? It’s very messianic, that the time for the Sovereign One from God has come and he is being anointed for his role.

The people in the house with Jesus are aghast. This woman comes out of nowhere, walks right in and starts dabbing this perfume on Jesus’ head. Women are not

allowed to do such things for starters. She has completely ignored propriety and stepped far beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior and good order.

Plus, she acted with extraordinary extravagance, using perfume costing a small fortune, even breaking the jar. This was *not* the way Jesus' disciples had been taught; to live frugally so that they could minister to the poor, the ones who had been such a central focus in Jesus' ministry.

Here the disciples get caught up in a kind of legalism – the law and order that reflects worldly empire even as the disciples pretend spirituality. This legalism by the disciples is an inflexible posture about rules and customs that grants authority *to* the rules rather than the *spirit* of the rules, or the *goals* of the rules. In their legalistic response, they show that they missed the **spirit** of the gift *and* they missed the sacred importance of this messianic-type anointing. They missed the promise.

According to their legalism, God should have called on some bum to bring cheap perfume and stink up Jesus. It would be like Jesus making cheap wine at the wedding in Cana. No way; he turned the water into the very best wine. So the woman brings the best perfume to Jesus, fulfilling her role to advance God's promise. But she is scorned and despised as the agenda of worldly powers infects the disciples who strongly oppose her.

We then learn that Judas has decided to betray Jesus by going to the chief priests. In Mark's gospel, we are not given a reason for Judas' betrayal. We can be certain that there were other powers at work in this whole mess.

A host of sinful powers are at work, twisting the plot line and using events to create havoc as the powers seem to successfully draw choices, agendas and intrigues away from the promise of God that Jesus bears. But the woman with the perfume stands in marked contrast to the disciples and to Judas. She has given herself extravagantly to the promise that Jesus bears. The others, the disciples, are still not quite ready to give themselves in the same way and embrace the promise of God.

Holding back, let us understand why we hold back. Cheering as we do on this Palm Sunday, for what do we cheer? Is it the willingness of Jesus to give himself into God's hands by coming to a face-to-face confrontation with worldly powers? Is this an acceptable sacrifice for the sake of the promise of new life? Ultimately, it ought to be seen as an issue of whether we serve worldly empire or heavenly kingdom. Let's be clear about giving oneself in faithful commitment to the promise of God, giving of ourselves in order to embrace the greatest blessing. This week, we measure that cost in even more profound ways.