

Love Itself Is The Gift

Just the other day, a friend stopped by.

This person once had millions of dollars, a fine home in Kahala, a new Mercedes every other year and more jewelry than some jewelry stores.

Through a series of bad luck, bad judgment, a bout with addiction and some unforeseen illnesses, this friend came to see me from the houseless shelter that is now her home.

Having lost everything, she is coming to believe that life is more than the material stuff she used to worship, and is wondering what new lessons life has in store for her.

Letting go of everything, willingly or unwillingly, is what brings us here tonight.

Now I grant you, thinking about letting go of everything on a night like this is ironic since so many of the days and nights leading up to this time together has been about everything **but** letting go.

These last weeks have seen many of us up and down the store aisles, having wrestled with our gift giving and meal planning and relative and friend airport picker upping...so that many of us arrive at this night exhausted, flustered and maybe a little uptight, hoping I am sure, for that gold standard of a good sermon: one that has a strong opening, a strong closing, and as little as possible in between!

And yet, letting go is exactly what God does in Jesus — the One in whom all things are held together, lets go of it all, becoming a helpless child, born in a barn, to an unwed teenage girl; who, in the words of St. Paul, “though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich.” 2 Cor. 8:9.

But the riches promised by God don't look anything like the riches lost by my friend.

The riches of God look something like Della and James, who are newlyweds.

They are madly in love.

They are also as poor as can be.

When their first Christmas comes around, they have nothing with which to buy gifts for their beloved.

But each of them has a prized possession.

James has a golden pocket watch, given to him by his grandfather, while Della has thick red hair that has grown past her waist.

Secretly, James sells his precious watch and buys Della a beautiful silver comb for her hair, while at the same time, Della shaves off her hair and sells it, so that she may buy a gold chain for James' watch.

On Christmas Eve, the two stare at each other, baffled by the extravagant – but completely useless – gifts they have given each other.

Their sacrifice, their letting go, is completely pointless of course; unless love itself is the gift. C. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 67, paraphrased.

It's like the story of Babette, a French woman, one of Paris' finest chefs, who loses everything in the political riots of 1870s France: her restaurant, her family, her livelihood, all of it, gone.

She heads to Denmark, into the farming country, and is taken in by a community headed up by two nuns, old women who have devoted their lives to God.

When Babette arrives, the small community is old and falling apart with petty arguments.

Babette tries to cheer them up, but to no avail.

One day, a letter arrives.

It seems Babette has won the Paris lottery and the prize is 3 million francs.

Babette decides immediately to treat her hosts to a proper Paris dinner, and proceeds to buy the finest china and glassware, she imports an entire set of dining room furniture along with silverware and linen table cloths, the most succulent meats, the finest cheese and cases of grossly expensive French wine.

The Danish peasants stare in amazement at the extravagant feast placed before them.

At first they are scared, even suspicious, but as the night goes on, the mood softens, and after a while, forgiveness and joy surround them all.

Finally, slightly drunk, they all stumble out into the village square, where they form a circle around the fountain, and sing and dance together.

"After all these years, they have finally touched the wellspring, and their hearts are overflowing.

Then someone says to Babette, "Well, I guess you'll be leaving us soon, won't you, now that you're a rich woman?"

She says with a smile, "Rich? I'm not rich.

I spent every penny I had on the banquet, 3 million francs.'" Id. at 67-68.

An extravagant waste?

Perhaps.

Unless love itself is the gift.

When we take a gander at our world, with starving children in Yemen, a disparity of wealth in our country that might make Louis the 16th blush, with a political divide so wide some families cannot even sit at a Christmas meal together, you might ask yourself if the event we come to celebrate this night; this miracle of God becoming a human being, is also nothing more than an extravagant waste?

After all, what has changed in 2000 years?

There remain wars and rumors of wars, famine and hatred and pain.

What did the incarnation, this miracle of God becoming human, accomplish?

Perhaps it is this.

You know the story of the prodigal son I am sure: the younger son who asks for his inheritance now, before dear old dad has died, and who then heads off into a far country and blows it all!

We often think that the father in that story represents God.

But what if God is not the father in the story, what if God is in fact the prodigal son — the one who squanders himself, for us, for our sake? K. Rahner, paraphrased.

What if the nature of God is to pour herself out, freely and with abandon, regardless of the cost, regardless of the pain?

What if my pal Fr. Bob Capon is right, that God "is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding present china is chipped.

What if God is a funny old uncle, with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other, and we wait for him, not in fear and trembling, but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun!"
R. Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, 501, paraphrased.

What if the poet is right when he exclaims that,

Love is recklessness, not reason.
Reason seeks a profit.
Love comes on strong, consuming herself, unabashed.

Yet in the midst of suffering,
Love proceeds like a millstone,
hard surfaced and straight forward.

Having died to self-interest,
she risks everything and asks for nothing.
Love gambles away every gift God bestows.

-Rumi

What if we are called to be yeast, to be salt, to be light in this world — that loves with abandon?

And while our small efforts may not seem to make a wit of difference, what if, like the mustard seed, these small efforts will one day cover the world?

"Let it go" is only a whisper away from the words that brought all things into being: "Let there be...light, water, humanity..."

Let go, of control, of anger, of resentments, of worry, of shame, of fear, of greed.

Let go of everything, and the mystery of creation opens to you.

This is the great insight of the Word becoming a human being.

“There is nothing to be renounced or resisted.

Everything can be embraced, so long as you cling to nothing.

When you let it go, you go through life like a knife through a done cake, picking up nothing, clinging to nothing, sticking to nothing.

And grounded in that fundamental innocence of your being, you can then be totally open, able to give it all back, even giving back life itself!

That’s what God is up to tonight.

That’s the invitation delivered to you tonight.

So very simple.

It only costs everything.” Bourgeault, at 70.

Because love itself is the gift.

+amen

