

Sermon by the Rector
Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
June 6, 2010

[1 Kings 17:17-24](#)

[Psalm 30](#)

[Galatians 1:11-24](#)

[Luke 7:11-17](#)

Paul takes considerable pains to make it clear that his wisdom, his message, his gospel, was not taught to him. It came from “no human source”. It was not conveyed to him by tradition or the guardians of tradition. The risen Christ, he says, gave it to him directly.

At the opposite pole of human experience we find the widow of Zarephath in her encounter with Elijah. She has learned very well what we might call the wisdom of the human generations. This wisdom is: everything, especially what looks like a gift, has a cost. Elijah, the man of God, coming to her in a time of drought and famine, took the little bit of flour and oil she had and turned it into food sufficient for the widow, her son and himself. A gift. Her first reaction to it, even before the relief she feels by virtue of being able to feed herself and her son, is probably dread. “Oh man of God, you have come to bring my sins to remembrance”. And thus it happens; her beloved son falls ill and dies.

We might think of the widow’s wisdom as ancient, even primitive. This it finds modern expression in the “moral calculus” we all devise, and live by. This calculus says: I can enjoy only what I have earned. In fact, only that which is earned is trustworthy. This calculus governs our daily routine: I work hard, fulfill my obligations on the job as best I can, and when I come home I fix myself a cocktail. Earned, and therefore trustworthy, enjoyment. Sometimes the calculus operates on a more spiritual level. I work hard, do a job well, and reward myself by indulging in a little self-satisfaction, or smugness, or even self-righteousness. Sometimes it’s diabolical: I’ve put up with my wife / husband / kids for however many years; I’ve earned a little fling.

This calculus represents wisdom from a human source, conveyed to us with and without words in the unfolding of the human generations. Despite its occasional diabolical expression, it’s largely a good, and important, and even holy thing. It keeps us on the right track, working hard, doing our best.

But we’re anxious, these days, about the continuing efficacy of this wisdom. We feel its fabric fraying, at both the bottom and the top of the socio-economic order. At the extremes, and creeping into the middle, we see unearned rewards, and the dream of unearned rewards, and it makes us wonder.

We feel, too, the power of the toxic culture of entitlement that’s insinuated itself into every corner of our world. Entitlement through achievement, but also through status, or even victimhood: we’re kidding ourselves if we say that its pervasive claims have not

touched our own souls also, and occasionally diminished the dignity of our lives or the quality of our relationships. Its power comes partly from its hybrid nature: the culture of entitlement has its roots in the ancient distrust of gifts, and also the modern fear that the moral fabric of our world is fraying.

Surely we want to find a way to loosen the grip of entitlement. To do so, we have to look again to Paul's gospel, to a wisdom that comes from no human source. This wisdom is the gospel: only a gift is trustworthy. Paul had developed a very elaborate moral calculus to guide his life. Obedience to the requirements of the pharisaic code, in all its detail, would yield the reward of prestige and security. A solid, trustworthy system. But his encounter with the risen Christ rendered it worthless: I count all things as refuse, he later wrote, in comparison with the supreme, utterly unearned gift of Christ's call to me.

We know, like Job knew, that what God gives, God takes away. God gave the widow of Zarephath a son, and sustenance for him in a time of famine, but then her cherished and only son died. The widow of Nain crossed paths with Jesus in the midst of a like tragedy. Each of us has experienced these widows' agony in some way. Sometimes something, or someone, that we value is snatched away in an instant. Other times, things that our precious slip from our grasp slowly, even imperceptibly. Did this happen to Al and Tipper Gore?

In any case, this experience – “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away” - lies at the root of the wisdom that comes from a human source: you should feel dread when you receive a gift; anchor it as quickly as you can in the moral calculus of earned reward.

But somehow, from no human source, we also come to know that what God takes away, God also restores. How deeply we yearn to experience this restoration as the widows of Zarephath and Nain did! Immediately, completely, before our very eyes: “Young man, I say to you, rise”; he sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Overwhelming.

Restoration doesn't usually happen this way. God returns what we love to us somewhere on the long arc of divine providence. We don't always recognize what's being given back to us when we receive it. It may return in a different or unexpected form; we need eyes to see and ears to hear. God may wait till we're ready to appreciate a gift, more than when we first received it, before restoring it.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more worthy of our trust than this cruciform logic, conveyed to us so powerfully by the simple wooden cross behind the altar here at Grace: born, died, raised up; given, taken away, restored. Even the rock-solid moral calculus of earned rewards pales in comparison. So we embrace what is given to us. We rely, like Paul, on a wisdom that comes from no human source, itself a gift. In its power, we do our best not to subject every last thing to the demands of the moral calculus of earned reward. We come to know that the security it offers is real, but limited. Thus we resist the blandishments of the entitlement culture that has estranged us one from another and

from God. We thank God for all that we have been given, trust in God's faithfulness, and embrace the world God has given into our care.