
The Currency of Joy

The Reverend Canon Elizabeth Knowlton
The Cathedral of St. Philip
December 20, 2009
Advent 4, 11:15
Luke 1:39-55

"Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away, oh love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny, hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it spend it and you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor. Love is something if you give it away you'll end up having more."

Many of us probably learned this song as children. While it certainly is not an Advent song by design, it has an important Advent reminder for us. While we engage in the many financial transactions of the season, we can lose sight of the special nature of love. Love is not something that operates in our typical currency of exchange. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It cannot be quantified, controlled, or even predicted.

These past few weeks have had their typical December pace. Parties, school functions, holiday concerts, cooking preparations, and on-line gift purchasing. Free shipping and shopping in my pajamas may be the one case where technology might actually save my life. For the most part I love all the hustle and bustle. But it also has an edge of danger to it. There is often too fine a line between excitement and anxiety undergirded with frenetic compulsion.

Some days I have done a good job of holding on to a quiet space for Advent. I have seen the beauty in the mist rising from the damp ground and enjoyed the chill in the air. Other days I've found myself straining under a heaped up load of expectations. When should the Christmas cards go out? Why aren't the lights hung yet? Am I going to have time to find the perfect gifts for those I love? It can all boil down to a lengthy list of things I need to accomplish to have an acceptable holiday season.

The main danger of the list is of course is that it becomes something to be conquered and controlled. It is not nurtured in darkness but finds its energy in the buzz of fluorescent light. It is not a prayerful litany of preparation or song of praise. The pregnant mother has yielded to a commando fleet with territory to conquer and a mission to accomplish.

The list is wonderful when it is going well. I can heave a sigh of relief as I make my way down it, but heaven forbid something new pop on to it. I am embarrassed to say that earlier this week I actually experienced an act of generosity as a burden. Rather than embracing the unexpected, I was annoyed that I hadn't seen it coming and had nothing to offer in exchange. As if it was all about exchange--- and tit for tat in the first place.

Given the current state of my house, the worst thing I can imagine right now would be an unexpected house guest, relative or not. So, the image of the visitation between Mary and Elizabeth is almost a shock this year. I mean, didn't Elizabeth have an awful lot going on, getting ready for the baby and everything? Could we have blamed her if she had been less than excited about the voice of Mary wafting into her home?

But somehow Elizabeth has seen this time of pregnancy as an opportunity to open herself to mystery. She is not perched in

her cottage reading "What to expect when you're expecting" or assembling her layette. Luke tells us she has spent the past five months keeping herself apart from her normal round of activity.

And what about Mary? She has been visited by an angel with the most improbable news, that she will give birth to God. It is hard to imagine how we'd react to such a pronouncement. I might have hidden under the bed. Her trip to Elizabeth in one way makes a lot of sense. I've always wondered if one reason she moves with haste to visit Elizabeth, is she's hoping the older woman will tell her she's misheard and not to worry. She couldn't possibly be expected to birth God.

But that is not what happens between these two women. They have both entered into a journey of new life with an openness that is frankly astonishing. Rather than sharing anxiety and cynicism with one another, they share the astonishing power of love transmitted through the holy spirit. And this type of gift exchange always yields joy.

Like the magic penny, it has something rather unexpected about it. It can cross between wombs and even the unborn babies become part of the dance. It is mystery and it is something we can never begin to make sense of until we share it with someone else.

We will experience the other as blessed and we are likely to break into song.

As I began my Ignatian retreat this summer, it took me a while to settle in. I wanted to be there, but there was something inside of me that resisted fully entering into the mystery of that much silence. I spent the first few days of my morning walk, looking at a spider web. It had the most horrible looking spider in the middle of it. It was creepy and had purple and red on its underbelly. I didn't like it, and yet I couldn't quite let go of it.

I'd walk to stare at it and then turn my back. Somehow that creepy spider became the essence of my resistance to fully entering the retreat. I felt like God was that spider and my destiny was to end up trapped and consumed.

Through prayer, grace, and the exchange of support and love with my spiritual director, I finally made the shift. I decided to take the risk and go wherever this time was going to lead me. My list of expectations was set aside in favor of mystery. The same day I let go of my fear, the web disappeared. I was glad to see it go, spider and all.

Much later in the retreat, I entered holy week. In your prayer you walk the path with Jesus to his death and find yourself waiting by the empty tomb. My retreat leader, at this point told me I needed to wait by the tomb until I was sure resurrection had happened. It couldn't be some intellectual exercise on my part. I had to be sure I felt deep within myself that resurrection had happened. When I was sure, I was to go and ring the church bell on the property and announce to all that Easter had come in the middle of August. Then I was to come and find my retreat director, Fay.

You would think this many days into the retreat that I would have had no reservations. But I wasn't really sure how I would really know the moment of resurrection had happened. I prayed that there would be a sign that even I could not dismiss or intellectualize away.

I spent the afternoon in the chapel and wandering the grounds. So far, no go. I started to wonder whether I'd be the only person to ever come on this retreat and not make it to Easter. At the point where I was most ready to give up, I took another walk on the path on the back of the property. As I rounded a corner I was stopped dead in my tracks. To my left was an even larger spider web than I had seen my first week. At the center was a spider that was covered with gold dots. The spider had woven a zig zagged crack down the center of the web. It looked like a cracked open tomb. In the arms of the spider were the wisps of what looked like a cloth.

My stomach lurched and I actually recommenced my walk. Surely that couldn't be it. But I turned back and went and looked at it again. What else could it be? The tomb was open and all that was left was the tattered remains of the cloth. It was a moment where I really had to decide what I believed. Was I going to reject this gift or embrace it?

I started making my way across the field to ring the bell. I was still a little nervous, but as soon as I grasped the rope and started to pull, I knew it was the right time. As the bell rang out, I turned and saw Fay coming out on the porch of her house. She started to come down the stairs and I turned towards her. Then, like a small child, I broke out into a full run to go to her outstretched arms. "He is risen" she said. And in that joyful embrace between two women, one younger, one

older---he was.

Amen

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