

All Life is a Gift: Take it for Granted!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Crossroads Community Services,
at the nine o'clock service, February 27, 2011: The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on Isaiah 49:8-9, 11-13, 16 and Matthew 6:24-34.*

Beware foodies and fashionistas! Jesus says, "Do not worry about...what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

In recent weeks I have been reading with admiration stories of people throughout the Middle East seeking to overturn political arrangements that have maintained Western security and predictability for decades. Their courage has inspired me but I have to admit to more than a little anxiety about the aftermath of overturned governments. In this morning's New York Times Nicolas Kristoff observes that many people "around the world fret that 'people power' will likely result in Somalia-style chaos, Iraq-style civil war or Iran-style oppression . . . Is that the future of the Middle East?" So I am not alone in my anxiety. Even Kristoff points out that after the American Revolution there were mis-steps. It took six years to elect our first president. Then in 1860 the country almost fell apart again. And I would add that we continue to struggle to find the right balance between protecting individual liberties and insuring the prosperity of all.

Kristoff, however, reassures us that he does not believe the future of the Middle East will necessarily be oppression. He asserts that "this line of thinking seems to be insulting to the un-free world. How can we say that these people are unready for a democracy that they are prepared to die for?" In the midst of this otherwise illuminating piece, Kristoff states that he has "been humbled by the lionhearted men and women I've seen defying tear gas or bullets for freedom that we take for granted."

I understand the sentiment and have been taught for years how wrong it is to take anything for granted. And yet when it comes to freedom I must admit that for me freedom has been granted. It was given to me. No doubt that it was purchased at a great price, but it was given to me. To not take it as granted defies the history of my freedom. It denies the sacrifices of others if I think even for a moment that I have earned my freedom. It does not depreciate the gift to take it as given. In fact it might even help me to appreciate it more.

I must admit that I am still caught up with the notion that in order to really value something I must earn it. This notion comes to us from the confusion that resulted from the historical coincidence of the Reformation and the rise of Capitalism. The notion has been perpetuated by parents, school teachers, and, yes, even preachers for the last 400 years. In fact I must admit that I have from time to time perpetuated this notion. And yet this notion is the source of more faithless fears and worldly anxieties in my life than almost anything else. The idea that something must be earned in order to be fully appreciated is not only wrong but also destructive.

When I first started working among Mexican immigrants in East Los Angeles, someone pointed out that the difference between Americans and Mexicans is that Americans live to work and Mexicans work to live. As with all broad brush characterizations you can challenge this distinction and find exceptions if you like. After all, there are far more differences among

Americans and among Mexicans themselves than there are differences between Americans and Mexicans. It is the distinction that I want to point out. It had never occurred to me before but has, at times, illuminated my path. I love work. And believe that we are called to work for the establishment of the reign of God here on earth. However, too often I work as if I believe that it all depends on me. That is the core of faithless fears and worldly anxieties; and as long as I believe or act as if the reign of God depends on my work, I will not take God's love for granted. Given. Not earned. Instead I will be hidden from the love of God. Cut off from love, I will live to continue working and worrying about what I will wear and what I will eat. I will try to stifle the aspirations of others toward freedom and democracy, worried that they are not prepared and they cannot handle freedom.

Instead Jesus calls us to be free as the flowers in the field and the birds flying through the air. Free of worry and anxiety. Free of condemning the legitimate desires of the oppressed to live free themselves. Free to love and to appreciate. And even free to appreciate good food and good fashion. Freed by the notion that we didn't earn it and don't deserve it but, rather, that all we have is given to us. "If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith?" The scholars of the Jesus Seminar translate the words "you of little faith" as "you who take nothing for granted." Think about that for a moment. You of little faith is translated as you who take nothing for granted. Having faith is not a matter of working harder to believe in God. Having faith is not a matter of working at all. Having faith is about taking things for granted. Understanding that they have been given to us and celebrating that gift. Celebrating all the gifts of God. Good food for the foodies. Good fashion for the fashionistas. Celebrating the liberation of historically oppressed people from all corners of the globe. This type of faithful celebration requires a different attitude from enjoying the fruits of one's labor. It requires freedom. Freedom from worry and anxiety. In the words sometimes attributed to Mark Twain, "You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching, love like you've never been hurt, sing like there's nobody listening, and live like it's heaven on earth."

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write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*