

11 December 2022

Anatomy of a Festival: Giving
Deuteronomy 15:7-11

In between the festival instructions of Deuteronomy 14 and 16 is a chapter of various other laws, such as the law that every 7th year all outstanding debts are to be canceled. And then there's this paragraph, from Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7-11:

⁷If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'

As many of you know, I grew up in the nation state of Singapore, where my parents were missionaries. Among the many advantages of that childhood was the range of my holidays. You see, Singapore is a multicultural nation, with a wide variety of religious traditions, and so it made the decision early on to give all its traditions their own holidays. So in addition to Christmas and Good Friday, from my own faith tradition, I got out of school for Buddhist Vesak Day, Hindu Deepavali, Muslim Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji, and *two* days for Chinese New Year. But it wasn't just days off; there was also loot. Now my parents worked with the Chinese people, so I didn't get any Muslim or Hindu loot, but did you know that if you go up to Chinese people at Chinese New Year and say *gong xi, gong xi*, they'll give you little red packets with money inside? Now, I don't know if that works for everyone, but for the dimple-cheeked, red-haired son of Mao Mu-shr and Mao Shr-mu (Pastor and Mrs. Morris), it was like magic. And if we'd only spent more time with the Malay and Tamil populations, I could have made out like a bandit, because in nearly every one of the religious holidays I listed, gift-giving is part of the tradition.

Why do you suppose that is? Why is it that religious traditions all over the world make giving a part of their festival observance? It's not really a practical thing, at least at those times. Sometimes gift-giving is openly practical: when we give a cash gift to a graduate or a crock pot to newlyweds or hedge clippers at a housewarming party, we're saying, "Congratulations on your new step in life. You'll probably need this." But gift-giving at religious holidays doesn't really have a clear, practical purpose, does it? It's giving for the sake of giving. So why? Why do we do that?

Here's what I think. A couple of weeks ago, when I was talking about preparing for festivals, I suggested that one reason we have religious holy days at all is to remind ourselves not to get too mired in our day-to-day lives in this world. We are a part of this world, and it is good, but this world is not the end of the story. We were made in the image of God, with a spark of God's own fire within us, so while we live in this world we have one foot in another. As Ecclesiastes puts it, "God has placed eternity in the heart of man." So, I suggested, we take

special days away from the drudgery of our routines as a reminder that we are more than our jobs, our labor, our schedules, our institutions, our national identities, our possessions, and everything else that makes up our lives in this world. Now I want to take that a step farther. Not only do our religious festivals remind us of another life, but they are practice runs. During our festivals, we are rehearsing for the coming Kingdom of God. We feast, and at our feasts, as I said last week, we break down walls and reach across ethnic, gender, cultural, and economic divisions, practicing for a time when none of those artificial categories will have any meaning. And at our festivals, we set aside our earthly preoccupation with our own possessions and rediscover sharing.

Because whatever else the Kingdom of God is, it is a place of generosity, a place of giving ourselves to others, a place of caring for others' needs before our own – and a place where we ourselves have no needs, because we are surrounded by others who are caring for us. This is the Kingdom of God, and while we aren't there yet in this life, or even close, God never stops pushing us closer. Look back at the section of law that we read from Deuteronomy 15. In this passage, we read God's clear, specific instructions for his people to follow once they take possession of the promised land: *Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.* The law goes on to specifically say not to worry about whether you'll be paid back. What if you aren't? Give anyway. *Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so ... Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth.*

The Kingdom of God is a generous community made up of people caring for and giving to each other, and furthermore, at some level, we all know it. It's one of those glimmers of the original image of God that still lingers in us. Something deep inside us admires generosity and despises selfishness. We may not always act like it, but at the holiday time, we remember the people that we are supposed to be. This is why we cheer for George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. This is why, schlocky or not, we still watch that Hallmark Christmas movie, where the female lead ends up rejecting the slimy big-city stockbroker in the three-piece Armani suit and marrying the small-town woodworker in the jeans and flannel shirt who takes care of the old widow next door. (Maybe you remember that one: it's called "All of Them.") This is why we volunteer more at Christmas time, give more to charity at Christmas time, are basically better people at Christmas time. For one short season, we give the Kingdom of God a test drive.

Now you might ask, if we can do this for one season, why can't we do it all the time? And the answer to that is, "We can." I know that, because some do. You probably know some of them. Some of them are in this room. One of them, sadly, is not me. Not yet, anyway. So until I get there, I need reminders. So I'm grateful for the picture sketched in Deuteronomy, of a community where other people's need is the first priority. I'm grateful for this season, where I am surrounded by others like me who are also pulling their better selves out of the closet and trying them on to see if they still fit. And I'm especially grateful for those around me who are more advanced in the Generous Kingdom than I am, from whom I can watch and learn. Thank you.

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Final word: Every good thing can be corrupted, and we human beings have a natural talent for that corruption. Call it our un-spiritual gift. That's how we start with a religious festival that inspires us to generosity, which is a very good thing, but manage to twist that generous impulse

into the spree of overspending on worthless garbage that we have today, because that spree powers our economy and lifts our stock market. Even on our holiest days, the world is too much with us. I can't fix that; all I can say is be aware of it. Let this be a season of giving, not the season of Black Friday bargains, because I was wrong as a child. It's not about the loot; it's about practicing the Kingdom of God. Amen.