

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Stephen Edmondson  
Hebrews 13:1-8  
Luke 14: 7-14

### The Gift of Service and Care

I was fascinated by the juxtaposition at the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews this morning: “Remember those who are in prison. Remember those who are tortured. Remember those who are married....” I have to admit that in my experience, one of these things is not like the others.... Though that’s the challenge of marriage, isn’t it.

Cyndi and I have only been married for four years, now, so I can’t pretend to be an authority on the subject. But from what I’ve experienced—as much in my failures as my successes—and what I’ve heard from those with far more married experience than I have—it’s the gift of serving one another, of caring for one another---it’s what you give to the other, to your partner, that makes marriage a gift and not a prison.

I think that we have trouble remembering this---we all too easily think in terms of what we’re getting out of a particular situation or relationship—and this is true of life and not just marriage---we think of what we’re getting and not what we’re giving---and when we do this, it too often feels like it’s not enough—that we’re trapped in a life of deprivation, cut off from all those things that we need, that allow us to thrive---and to be trapped in a deprived life—that’s prison....

But that’s not the point of our relationships—to get something from them. The point is what they allow us to give---those are the richest relationships—those with a wild potential for giving. There was a movie out several years ago, *Marvin’s Room*, it was based on a play and it starred Meryl Streep and Diane Keaton. Keaton played a self-less sister who cared for her bed-ridden father and other members of her family. Streep was the sister who ran off to have a life of her own—it was a self-centered life and it felt rather empty. At one point in the movie, Streep’s character comments to Keaton’s, with some envy, that she (Keaton) has so much love in her life. Keaton starts to respond that, yes, she is blessed that her dad and children love her so much, but Streep cuts her off. “No, that’s not what I mean,” she says. “You have so many people to love. You give your love to so many people.” For Streep, that’s what made Keaton’s life so rich—and her own so empty---it was the reality of the love that Keaton gave, that she shared with those around her that filled her with blessing.... The point of the movie was for Streep to realize that her bed-ridden father wasn’t a burden to bear, but an opportunity for loving, for caring, and that is pure gift---albeit, it was also often a painful, exhausting, draining gift.

Two years ago, when I was in the delivery room with Cyndi, and suddenly Andrew came out, and he was just there---(and let me add that Cyndi didn’t think it was so sudden)---but when I saw him there, my life changed more profoundly in that moment than in any other moment that I’ve experienced. It hit me in my gut---here is someone who is

absolutely and utterly dependent on me. He has no resources of his own---at least not yet. He is utterly vulnerable to the world, utterly helpless---and at the same time, he was so beautiful—even covered with blood and white slime—he so worthy of love. And he called from me for a love and a care---he called me out of myself—he called me to give myself to him, and the last two years have been so much about my efforts to figure out how to do this. That was his gift to me---his need and demand that I give myself to him.

I was reminded of this with Christopher's birth last week. It wasn't the same life-changing experience—Andrew had already seen to that. It was more a reminder, as Andrew becomes more sturdy and more clear that he doesn't need me because HE CAN DO IT HIMSELF—Christopher was a reminder that these children in my life provide me the demand and opportunity to give myself to them, and they provide me with blessing in that. They also offer me challenge---finding the time and energy for them—figuring out how I can and should care for them---Christopher is so tiny and delicate—even at 10 lbs. It's a struggle just figuring out what I should do.

This is what Jesus is talking about in this morning's gospel---that we are to invite the poor, the blind, and the lame to our feasts and not our friends, because they're the one's who can't repay us. This is just another way to say that we were created and put here to love and care for one another and that you have the most real opportunities to actualize this love when you give to those who can't give back---that then it really is a gift.

Only I think Jesus is wrong about a part of this---or perhaps I should say that if he thought his audience would have gotten it, he would have made his point more subtly. When you give to those in need, you are repaid then, in the gift---you don't have to wait until you die. It's just that the repayment is subtle---it's in the connection you make to those beyond your immediate circle---or even more, the connection you make to the life that flows through this world---the life instilled in our universe at it's creation---you become a part of that creative force---a part of the love that came to a focus in Jesus, that heals what's broken, that redeems. It's subtle, but it's rich, joining yourself to the river of life that waters our world.

All the work for the fall clothing sale has begun---and from what I've seen, it's a lot of work, and it will weigh on those who bear the most of it, I'm sure. But I'm also sure that it will be a blessing for them, as well—this beautiful opportunity to give themselves to our neighbors in need. I mention this, because they want and need to share this beauty with all of us. They need help, so that the weight of this beauty doesn't become crushing for them. But, more importantly, I think, we need to help—if not with this, then with whatever calls for our gifts—so that we can reap the blessings of caring for those who need and want our care.

At the same time, I realize, from what I've seen, that this is one of the greatest burdens of living in Fairfax county---that we're so busy that it's not clear how we can find time to offer ourselves to the poor, to those who need our love. Much of what we're busy with is time spent in love---driving children to umpteen million activities is a labor of love. And yet, the overall effect of this busyness is truly tragic, because it thwarts so many of our

efforts to serve one another. We end up imprisoned in a maze of roadways and appointments, tortured by dual threat of traffic lights and blackberries. We are cheated out of relationships of giving and the richness that they can provide.

This sermon isn't about guilt, and it isn't about asking you to squeeze yet another event into an already overwhelming full schedule—though I do hope that you'll volunteer for the sale. It's more to open a conversation—or maybe I should say for me to enter into a conversation with which you have already been engaged. How do we find time, where there is no time? How do we remember and recognize that blessing that comes through serving and caring for the other, and how do we not let the burdens of that service hide the blessings? I'll be interested in discovering the insight that you can provide. Amen.