

Jesus Gives All He Has
The Cross Takes Everything There Is

Reflections Offered During The Good Friday Service

April 19, 2019

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There's a Buddhist precept that goes, I will practice taking only what's freely given. It's a good practice. Paying close attention to what your taking, from who, and how. Practicing taking only what's freely given.

Of course, if you truly take up the practice, if you truly pay close attention, you'll find that you're faced with all kinds of questions, issues, and dilemmas associated with taking from others, and what *freely given* means.

How much of what I take is freely given?

How much of what I take is not freely given?

From whom do I take, from what, from where?

How much power, or leverage, or coercion is involved in my taking?

To whom, or to what, do I freely give?

Who, or what, takes from me that I don't freely give?

Paying close attention to our taking, and our giving, is a spiritual practice, because how we take, and how we give, are spiritual practices.

So much of our life consists of taking from others, and giving to others, in so many different ways. The quality of how we take, and how we give, goes a long way in defining the quality of our spirituality.

In Lent, I've been looking at Jesus and the cross through the lens of giving and taking.

Jesus gives.

Jesus gives freely, he freely gives.

Jesus gives all he has.

The cross takes.

The cross takes what's freely given, and what's not freely given.

The cross takes everything there is.

Of course, Jesus takes as well.

Life consists of giving and taking. There's no way around it.

Jesus takes, but only what others freely give.

Jesus does not take from others what others don't freely give. Jesus does not coerce people to give to him.

However, unlike Jesus, who gives and takes, the cross just takes.

That's it, the cross just takes. No giving. Just taking, everything there is.

The cross doesn't participate in life, only in taking life, in death.

In Lent, I've been looking at my own life through the lens of Christ's way of giving and taking, and the cross's way of taking.

How much of my giving and taking is done in more of a Christ-like manner than a cross-like manner?

How much of my giving and taking is done in more of a cross-like manner than a Christ-like manner?

Like the Buddhist precept, paying attention to how I actually live my life, to how I actually give and take, is a powerful spiritual practice. And a profoundly humbling one. One that calls for lots of confession. And repentance.

In year's past, I've read the story *Ragman*, by Walter Wangerin, to the congregation sometime during Lent. I'm not going to read the story this evening, but I'm going to revisit it.

In the story *Ragman*, the ragman gives new rags to people in exchange for their old rags.

He sees a woman sobbing into an old rag. He takes her old rag and gives her a new one. With her old rag comes her sorrow, and the ragman now sobs.

And so it goes.

The ragman takes a woman's bonnet soaked in blood from an open wound on her head, and he gives her a new one. With her bonnet comes the wound, now open on his head.

A one-armed man needs a new coat. The ragman takes the old coat and gives the man a new coat. Now the ragman has only one arm, while the man in the new coat has two.

He gives a homeless sick alcoholic man a new set of clothes, leaving the ragman staggering sick down the road, one-armed, wounded, sobbing, to the town dump, where he dies on a heap of garbage.

The ragman is Christ.

He exchanges joy for sorrow, health for sickness.

In doing so, I think he's doing more than demonstrating extreme compassion. He's demonstrating a fundamental ethic or precept: give more than you receive whenever you exchange with other people.

I think this is a fundamental ethic, a spirituality, an orientation to life that Jesus teaches.

Give more to others than you take from others.

Woe to you who take more than you give. Repent. Turn your exchange orientation around. Give more than you take.

I'm not saying, be fair and seek an equal exchange with other people. I'm saying, go the extra mile and give more than you take.

I think that's not only a fundamental message that Jesus teaches, I think that's how Jesus lives. I think he pushes the envelope on Jewish notions of equity and justice. I think he presents himself to the world as more radical example of righteousness.

Now, on the face of it, it sounds irrational. Give more than you take, it's crazy. Logic dictates that if you give more than you take, you'll end up with nothing.

Yes, you will, unless everybody does it.

When everybody does it, nobody ends up with nothing, ever. In a community of givers, where everybody freely gives, everybody has what they need, always. Everybody is always looking out for everybody else.

It's called the kingdom of God.

But here's the thing.

Jesus makes it clear that we shouldn't wait for everybody to practice it with us. In fact, quite the opposite. We will be in the minority.

Some people will want to join us in living this way.

Some people will take advantage of us. Some people will ridicule us, or feel threatened by us. Some people will just take, and take, and take from us, without ever giving in return. Some people may want to kill us.

Jesus makes this very clear.

Give more than you receive.

Jesus gives all he has.

The cross takes. That's all it does, it takes. Without giving.

The cross takes from people what they freely give, and the cross takes from people what they do not freely give.

Or let me put it this way, whatever, or whoever, takes without giving is a cross.

Whatever, or whoever, takes what others do not freely give is a cross.

Taking without giving, taking what others do not freely give, is a sign of the cross.

An institution, or a system, or a person can bear the sign of the cross.

Maybe faintly—their behavior is kind of cross-like.

Maybe glaringly—their behavior is really, aggressively, ruthlessly cross-like.

The cross coerces people to give.

The cross uses power, leverage, privilege, lies, promises, prejudices, threats, rewards, anything it must, to take.

And take, and take, and take, from others, from the earth, until it takes everything there is. Its appetite is voracious, insatiable, never satisfied.

Wendell Berry has written a poem I find incredibly powerful. What he in this poem calls the objective resonates with what tonight I'm calling the cross.

Sabbath Poem II, 1997

Wendell Berry

Even while I dreamed I prayed that what I saw was only fear
and no foretelling,
for I saw the last known landscape destroyed for the sake
of the objective, the soil bulldozed, the rock blasted.
Those who had wanted to go home would never get there
now.

I visited the offices where for the sake of the objective the
planners planned
at blank desks set in rows. I visited the loud factories
where the machines were made that would drive ever

forward
toward the objective. I saw the forest reduced to stumps and
gullies; I saw
the poisoned river, the mountain cast into the valley;
I came to the city nobody recognized because it looked
like every other city.
I saw the passages worn by the unnumbered
footfalls of those whose eyes were fixed upon the objective.

Their passage had obliterated the graves and the
monuments
of those who had died in pursuit of the objective
and who had long ago forever been forgotten, according
to the invariable rule that those who have forgotten forget
that they have forgotten. Men and women and children now
pursued the objective
as if nobody ever had pursued it before.

The races and the sexes now intermingled perfectly in
pursuit of the objective.
The once-enslaved, the once oppressed were now free
to sell themselves to the highest bidder
and to enter the best-paying prisons
in pursuit of the objective, which was the destruction of all
enemies,
which was the destruction of all obstacles, which was to clear
the way
to victory which was to clear the way to promotion, to
salvation, to progress,
to the completed sale, to the signature
on the contract, which was to clear the way
to self-realization, to self-creation, from which nobody who
ever wanted to go home
would ever get there now, for every remembered place
had been displaced; the signposts had been bent to the
ground and covered over.

Every place had been displaced, every love
unloved, every vow unsworn, every work unmeant
to make way for the passage of the crowd
of the individuated, the autonomous. the self-actuated,
the homeless
with their many eyes opened only toward the objective
which they did not yet perceive in the far distance,
having never known where they were going,
having never known where they came from.

The cross takes without giving.

The cross diminishes, reduces, turns diversity into uniformity, turns freedom into slavery.

The cross displaces, unloves, poisons, obliterates.

The cross sucks the blood, and smothers the breath, from the living.

The cross takes hope.

The cross takes peace.

The cross takes joy.

The cross takes love.

The cross takes Jesus Christ.