

Chapel Talk
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Last week I was in Boston for three days interviewing teacher candidates for positions here next September. Mr. Kemer, Mr. Austin, Ms. Matouk, Isabel and I returned home Saturday night after a seven-hour drive, all of us exhausted but relieved to be home in familiar territory. As we packed up to leave Boston, I noticed Mr. Kemer ducking into the hotel gift shop to find small presents for his children and wife. Ms. Matouk informed me that he performs this ritual at the end of each trip away from home. I was touched by his gesture, yet in haste I couldn't find anything to bring back to my three boys. So, I tried to rationalize my frugality by thinking that I could be just as good a father, provide just as many smiles upon my arrival back as Mr. Kemer would by embracing my children, telling them how much I missed them, how happy I was to see them, and then give them me, fully, for the rest of the weekend. As I approached the house Saturday night, the warm glow of home lights stretching across the frozen snow, beckoning me to the awaiting arms of my tender children, I tingled in anticipation of that first hug and the intangible gift of love and the enduring present of fatherly affection and presence – get the pun? – which I was about to bestow upon them. I opened the door, beheld them playing at the kitchen table; yet before I could say anything, Joshua, not even looking up from his Game Boy toy, not even acknowledging my admittedly empty arms yet overflowing heart, Joshua, this child of my loins and incarnation of all that I cherish most in life, this Joshua mutters, “So, like, what'd you get me?” So much for the success of my cheap Valentine's Day gift. Something told me Mr. Kemer's reunion was going a lot better.

Despite how much eventual fun Joshua, Carter, Christopher and I did experience that night over Legos and Harry Potter and Playmobile and fort building, Joshua's question caught me. We have all been instructed since childhood that it is better to give than to receive – and Joshua clearly expected that I was going to be performing the giving. The reading from Matthew asserts the paradox that in giving we receive. Accumulation of earthly wealth and possessions gets us nowhere because we can't take it

with us to the next life. The Gospels claim it's easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter into Heaven. Our culture insists on us to donate to charities, to share our time; the Vestry Auction expects us to fork over obscene amounts of money for cookies and dinners, even for Mr. Austin's student folder one year, all for the very worthy cause of St. Mark's in South Africa. Because so much has been granted to us, we should pass on that bounty to others. The legacy of our "day-on" celebration for Martin Luther King was that we gave to others. The alumni office of every school you attend expects this charity from you; and St. Andrew's is no exception.

Obviously, I whole-heartily embrace such selfless acts in the service of others. It is one of the hallmarks of this community, and it endows all of us with intangible gifts in return. What I'm curious about tonight is the other side of Jesus' teachings, the non-cynical side of what Joshua hoped for, as every child does, which is to receive. I recently heard two people talking about their struggles in life. One person asked if he could help in any way. The other admitted that it was hard to ask, but that she was getting better at asking. She then said she realized that while it was better to give than to receive, she was learning the hard way how equally good it was to receive, to be able to receive, to be open to receiving.

The more I thought about that conversation, the more I recognized how onerous it is for us to receive. In fact, as I was struggling with writing this talk, I contacted three ministers about this topic, and none of them replied, indicating perhaps that this subject is religiously too problematic. So, I went back to my household expert on this theme. At our dinner table last Sunday night, I asked my three boys what was the difference between giving and receiving. Here's Joshua's response:

You see, getting is buying, getting it for yourself,
but receiving is getting something from somebody.
With getting, you know what it is, while receiving
you don't know what it is because there's a mystery
to it, like magic.

The wisdom of a nine-year-old: what Joshua understood is that when we get something, we're usually isolated and there's no surprise. However, when we receive, we are surrounded by a community, there are powerful relationships connecting us, and most importantly, there's something exciting, trembling, hovering, unseen involved—perhaps the elements of faith or communion or grace.

Why is it so arduous for us to receive? Initially, it's difficult to know what we need. We flail around in confusion, blind to why we are distressed, ignorant to what will help. We tend not to listen well, not only to others, but also especially to ourselves--what our bodies say to us about sleep or nourishment or exercise, what our feelings are about our choices in life, about our jobs, about our partners. Not being attuned to those needs makes it difficult to know what we want, what will help, what will assuage.

How do we become better listeners? I believe we need to give ourselves more time alone, away, quietly, to reflect, to sift through, to sense what we're feeling or responding to or needing. Rigorous exercise, power runs, epic squash battles with Mr. Gieske or Susan Clarkson always appeal to me more for what they supposedly will do to my aging body; yet a walk across the fields for 20 minutes, while it hardly burns a calorie from the nine chocolate chip cookies I inhaled at lunch, invariably reveals something, peels away a layer or two, sometimes just by allowing me to hear different sounds. Recently I have noticed that I don't turn the radio on during car trips to furnish that nurturing silence.

The second aspect that's difficult about receiving is that it's very hard for us to ask. Men refuse to ask for directions, which is the punchline about why Odysseus took 10 years to get home, or why the Wise Men were late getting to Bethlehem. As a culture, we are supposed to be self-reliant, independent, able to do it all ourselves. Advertising pits the individual against society, and ultimately, so the commercial message goes, we have to do it alone. Parents want children to grow up to be able to survive alone; teachers wean students away so that they can learn by themselves; coaches know that their players

ultimately have to perform without them. Taken to an extreme, we have created for ourselves a battlefield of the individual against the world. It's perceived as a sign of weakness to ask for help, a deficiency of the self, an inability to stand by ourselves. We are supposed to know the answers. We are supposed to cope.

Ironically, the ones who ask for help are usually the most courageous, are the most willing to look squarely at the hardest questions, and are internally the strongest to face the most complex challenges. The paradox is that to be open to receiving is an extraordinary gift. There is something liberating in receiving, in allowing yourself to be given to, to be helped, to hear fully and acknowledge and appreciate a compliment, to recognize--even embrace—the effort of another. Because we hear “it's better to give”, we sense that “it's better not to receive” – yet the people I've known who could ask for and receive help are the ones who most effectively exemplify how to live, how to exist with other people, how to exist with yourself.

I've been acutely aware of this strange struggle about receiving since my marriage ended two years ago and I became not only a single parent, but had to redefine myself as a person without a partner. I think it was hard for me to face the emotional turmoil of those days because I'd grown up in a family and community where people gave, and where people exhibited a “stiff upper lip” about pain or confusion or emotions. Furthermore I grew up in a time when asking for help was still an admission of weakness. So when the bottom fell out two years ago, even as friends surrounded me, I didn't know how to ask for help because I didn't know what I needed. The one time I cried, really cried, about the pain and loss and anger, was in a counseling session when my therapist asked me what I wanted. This seemingly simple question drove deep into the rawest wounds, because I don't think I'd ever fully considered that question—not that I'd lived a saintly life of “giving, giving, giving,” but in reality I hadn't listened to me, I hadn't recognized what I needed to sustain or nurture me. I think it hurt because I started to see what I hadn't been doing, what was missing, what was hollow. Eventually that afternoon I said that what I wanted was to go home to New Hampshire to my parents' house, the house where my grandparents lived in as we grew up in the summers. For me, that place,

those people, they would take care of me, they would give, and gradually, I could receive. I could receive safely, passionately, wholly. I think I cried because even at age 41, there was something so liberating, so unburdening, so restorative, so good in knowing I could receive.

As I look back on that day, I also feel it was the first time I saw not just my connections to those around me, but their cables to me. In being able to ask, in readying myself to receive, in opening my arms for something to fill the void, there was suddenly comfort, balm, hope. I didn't have to worry about how to do it alone. We can easily forget that from birth, human beings depend on others. Unlike other animals, human babies cannot survive on their own for many years. We exist, we survive, only as we receive from others, not only physically, but also, I was discovering, emotionally and spiritually. To be nurtured is to receive.

As my own world has changed over the last two years, I'm much more aware of those around me who have the strength to ask for help, who can summon up the courage to receive—receive advice, counsel, concern, praise, who can truly receive existence. In that state of being which is so much more profound and meaningful than merely getting—remember how Joshua perceived it as magical, like the unexpected Christmas present which incarnates the essence of that day—there's where we affirm friendships. I don't think you can really give unless you can fully receive, because in receiving, you embrace, you are embraced, you connect.

In "The Gift," which Mr. Rue read, the speaker narrates the almost symbiotic relationship between giving and receiving: as he receives from his father, he gives to his wife. It's the heart of teaching, an act of love, a gift of grace. That moment of terror and pain, the removal of a metal splinter (perhaps the moment of fear which precedes receiving, which sets the stage for receiving) becomes the creative force between the two individuals, not just because of the father's story, but also because of the boy's ability to hear. He listens so completely that he can recite the same story to his wife when she needs to hear, when she herself has a splinter. He has the ability *and* the skill to give

because he was first able to receive. The speaker describes what the father did as planting, an image which illustrates the crucial role of soil. To grow, we need a seed *and* an environment that can cultivate that seed. The seed, the giver, is only part of the creation. In this poem, it's the speaker's hand that germinates the seed: indeed, it is that same hand years later which is able to honor the father's story by removing a splinter from his wife's finger. And so the bond between parent and child and husband and wife are cabled, and at the end of the poem, those acts of giving and receiving are consecrated with a kiss.

I'm not arguing that Jesus is wrong about the importance of giving, but I do believe that it is blessed to receive. If we fail to learn how to receive, how to ask for help or counsel, we risk enduring an isolated existence where we only *get*, a life without magic or connection. In a strange way, I feel as if much of my life has re-begun in the last two years. The friendships I've experienced during this period, even those which stretch back 20 to 30 years, have meant more to me because they have been grounded in more honest sharing and collaboration—because I've been able to receive, and perhaps for the first time, I've recognized moments when I have been received. I don't deny the terror or hurt or desolation those splinters inflict, and I know mere comfort does little to explain the pain or recover the loss. However, in receiving we join a community: we plant hope and strength and faith in ourselves and in those around us. *There* is grace from a source mightier than we are. *There* is the gift.

THE GIFT

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
 my father recited a story in a low voice.
 I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
 Before the story ended he'd removed
 the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale
 but hear his voice still, a well
 of dark water, a prayer.
 And I recall his hands,
 two measures of tenderness

he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy's palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
You would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
when he's given something to keep.
I kissed my father.

Li-Young Lee