

Experiencing God: The Great Give-Back

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Colossians 1:15-23

July 22, 2018
Faith Community

I told you this story a few months ago, but it's so rich that I need to tell you again with a different twist this time around. It happened during the same mission trip to Guatemala in which we met Delfina, whose story I shared with you last week.

It's Tuesday morning, and the twelve of us are well into our mission week down there. All eight men share the same bedroom, which is a sermon for another day. Around 6:30 that morning, someone comes in, whacks me on the foot and asks if I'd like to be on the radio. Never having been an early riser, I'm just coming to life, so I mutter 'what for,' or something like that.

It's a discussion thing of some kind, and it starts in twenty-five minutes, so I better get my act together and be glad it's radio and not television. I'm less than a pretty picture at that hour or any hour, for that matter.

Sefarino is the gentleman who runs the radio station down there, and is host of this particular program, which comes live from a little studio right in the mission. Teri, our missionary in residence whom many of you know, will translate for me into Spanish, and Sefarino, in turn, will translate into Quiche, the tribal dialect that's spoken by many of the people in that part of the country.

Sefarino begins the program by introducing me. While that's going on, Teri leans across the table and whispers, "What passage are you going to use?" I instantly respond with a Pavlovian dog kind of thing: "Teri, I don't even know what I'm supposed to do, let alone what passage to use." Whereupon she replies, "You pick a passage from the Bible and teach on it." Keep in mind, this exchange is going on while I'm being introduced. Also keep in mind, this is an hour-long program, in which, I'm just finding out, instead of a discussion, I am the main course.

I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but right away I pick up on a few things. First of all missionaries are exceptionally resourceful and alert, ready to go at a moment's notice, and expect others to operate in the same manner. God regularly uses that to do incredible things, and Teri is no exception. We talked about my episode at lunch

later that day and she quickly reminded me that it says in Scripture, “Be ready in season and out.” I also learned, all over again, what God can do with an empty cup when it’s turned over to him. He took that hour and worked a wonder. It was absolutely a God thing. I was pumped afterwards!

I think all of us on that Guatemala team experienced at least one event like that. God grabbed whatever puny loaves and fishes we may have had and turned them into a delectable feast for his glory. I also continue to learn it’s how we grow. It’s how you grow. You will not learn what God can do in and through you unless and until you face a situation in which there is no hope unless God steps in.

When that happens, and God does his work, you, in turn complete the equation. You don’t dare keep it to yourself. You tell your story.

Here’s another thing I learned: telling and remembering personal experiences like that make all the difference when offering time comes around.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy Moses is teaching the people everything he can before they cross over into the Promised Land. He knows he himself will not be part of that. He also knows he doesn’t have much more time to live, so he chooses his words carefully and fills them with all the godly passion that’s in him.

When they get there and experience all the good things that’re in store, he tells them to take some of those good things and give them to God as an offering. But here’s what makes it special: as part of their act of giving, they’re to tell their story. You see it in today’s passage:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer. Then we cried out to the LORD, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with miraculous signs and wonders. (Deut. 26:5-8)

It’s only after they tell their story that they make their offering. That, friends, is a stroke of genius. Giving out of a grateful heart changes everything. It even changes you.

One of the stories I remember as I give my offering is how God took a potential disaster of a radio program and turned it into a thing of beauty. God did that, friends! And whatever gift I return to him is one way of saying thanks.

What stories might you tell? What might you be thinking when your turn comes? Make it personal. Make it specific. Also, don't keep it to yourself, whatever you do. You'll be amazed at what happens in you and in those to whom you tell your story.

There's another level of this, and it serves to just pile on the glory. Our New Testament lesson has one of the most brilliant descriptions of the work of Christ anywhere.

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:16-17)

One day I preached on that passage in Guatemala and walked up and down the aisles and pointed at different people and said to each one,

"In him, you hold together."

Can it get any better than that? Yes it can! Look at what comes a little later:

Once you were alienated from God. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (vv. 21-22)

That's the other story you tell when you make your offering. You make it as personal as you can, and then you make it universal as well.

"God, you did this for me. You made me a new person, and I'm so grateful. God, in Jesus you put it all together, and I'm so grateful." Tell your personal story. Then tell the story of the hope of the world!

That's why life is different for you.

That's why you spend your time in the way that you do.

That's why your heart quickens whenever you think of someone who is without the good news of Jesus Christ.

That's why you put money in the plate.

That's how you find joy that's independent of external circumstances.

And that's the icing on this cake.

At the end of the Deuteronomy passage we read this:

And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. (Deuteronomy 26:11)

The further along we got in that morning radio broadcast, the more excited I became. God was clearly doing something special, so as we wrapped up I spoke of how there are times when you become so overtaken by the Holy Spirit that if you don't express it the joy will blow up all over you. Friends, I believe that. With all my heart and soul I believe that. We're to be all over that.

So become storytellers, will you? Life is different that way. And get ready to be blown away by how God will work in and through you.