

Grace in Flesh: Forgiveness and the Discipline of Giving

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I have been working with the Stewardship Council for nearly three years now, and in that time I have probably heard a hundred rationales and motivational techniques for giving in the church. These range from the “gimmicky” approaches of saddlebags and slickly produced resources to the theologically justified appeals to giving that attempt motivation from reason and sound logic. Now, before anyone gets too defensive about what has worked for them or what makes sense, let me say that I think that in the continuum of giving, every saddlebag and theological premise has its justification. Certainly for each of us, and for every one of our congregations, what will probably work is some combination of things that inspire, educate, and encourage giving, making it possible for people to fulfill their God-given call to generosity. I have no qualms with the fact that there is a high degree of specificity when it comes to what will “work” in one place or another, and indeed it should be so more often than not. I have wondered, however, if our attention to the latest thought or most recent program substitute for our lack of attention to the Christian community’s basic task of forming its members, and, by extension of forming itself. I wonder how much time and effort is expended on *getting people to give* rather than on *forming givers*.

Someplace in our shared Christian history it was suggested that “Christians are made, not born.” To our post Industrial ears that may sound too mechanical, as if people need to be manipulated like so many parts on an assembly line. But in reality it recognizes the fact that being a Christian entails much more than simply being called such. Being Christian entails a call to *discipleship*, an invitation into a way of life, and it means being formed in that way. This formation of a Christian happens by God’s grace: it is God who changes hearts and minds, God who transforms lives, God who grants life and community and wholeness and peace. But, God’s grace also works with our nature and with our tendency to wander. Inasmuch as we are prone to wander from the way, we block the grace that God freely bestows, we prevent the fullness of the relationship with God and one another that is possible for each of us. It is in this wandering, this *sin*, that our hearts and minds turn to a survival mode. And in that mode, we insulate ourselves from others and the world; we become small and alone. All our efforts focus on self-preservation and self-perpetuation and we lose sight of the fact that in order to find ourselves, we must lose ourselves.

The way to address our tendency to wander is to seek forgiveness. Certainly if we recognize the fact that we sin, then we can seek forgiveness and move on. Forgiveness is and should be a hallmark of the Christian life, but it is an “*after_the_fact*” reality: we sin first then seek forgiveness. That we can be forgiven and reconciled is the hope on which many of us stand. This is part of the Good News! Forgiveness restores the relationship with God and others, it re-establishes the self as the subject of generosity, and it reconfirms the fact that our worth and our dignity are affirmed when we reach beyond ourselves. Forgiveness reminds us that in order to be whole, we must also be in relationship. And being in relationship requires a spirit of generosity and an investment of self in something beyond our own skin.

The question still open is whether there is anything that we can do “before the fact,” proactively, to open ourselves to the spirit of generosity. I believe the answer is yes, and it falls within the realm of *discipline*. As we are formed as disciples, we can use discipline as a way to open ourselves to God’s grace. We can begin by practicing generosity and establishing for ourselves a pattern of giving.

Far from being restrictive, discipline from the Christian standpoint is meant to *free* us. First, it opens us to experience the Christian way, and encourages us to practice that way so that we can be free to receive God's grace as it is given. The discipline of giving can prevent us from slipping into that narrow world of selfishness in which we allow the self to be center of the universe. Giving, as a discipline, helps those of us for whom the understanding of giving as grace, as a free and natural event, is still something we are working toward.

Practicing the discipline of giving can also mark us as followers of Jesus, in whose flesh the generosity and outward movement of God can be found. Surely our Christian life is a public one. The myth of a private Christianity just doesn't hold up to the scrutiny of scripture nor of the wisdom of the centuries. To be a Christian is to be a witness to something beyond ourselves, into which we have been invited, and by which we find meaning. A disciple ought to be known by the life she or he lives and by deeds that testify to the presence of the Christ. If we walk in the way, others will know it by our lives, lives that will mirror the generosity of the Creator, who gives out of pure love.

As disciples, many of us need to *learn* the discipline of giving so that we can know and be known as followers of Jesus. Often we want to start with an interior motivation to give since it seems more genuine, more sincere to begin that way. We want to believe that our lives are freely responsive to God, that giving simply makes sense, that it is a wonderful warm experience, that it is clear that when we say "yes" to God we say yes to giving. I do not believe it is always so. St. Paul reminds us that, "there are a variety of gifts but the same Spirit, different works but the same Lord," (I Corinthians 12:4_5). For some of us, giving, especially financial giving, does *not* come as one of those gifts of the Spirit. If we are to hold it as a value, it must be learned. If it is to be learned, it must be taught, and taught for its own sake. If we believe that giving and generosity are hallmarks of the Christian life, then we ought not to use the grace or discipline of giving as a way to manipulate another. Giving to the ministry of the congregation or to the ministry of the wider church is important, but it is hardly a prime motivation for a Christian.

We give because we believe it is part and parcel of the life of a disciple. We find people and places to receive our generosity when we become part of something meaningful that is bigger than any one of us. I have no doubt that our churches and our denomination are such communities of meaning for many who claim membership in the United Church of Christ. I believe this would be even truer if we found, in every place the UCC gathers, the spirit of forgiveness that frees the soul to give, and the discipline of giving that connects us as disciples of Jesus.

Perhaps in this Jubilee year we might be reminded that we are called to just such things: a time of reconciliation, a chance for forgiveness, and an opportunity to receive the grace and learn the discipline of giving. What would it be like if every setting of the church did its best to "form" people as givers rather than simply try to get people to give? What would our world be like if each of us practiced forgiveness and generosity in the days to come? Why don't we try it and find out? We have nothing to lose, and possibly the world has everything to gain.

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