

## DON'T EAT MY COOKIES!

(11/12/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 5:38-42

John 10:11-21

*“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” (Mt. 5:40-41)*

*“For this reason, the Father loves me: I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” (Jn. 10:17-18)*

Perhaps this has happened to you--or something like this has happened to you.

A businesswoman was in an airport terminal waiting for her plane to depart. Before she settled down, she purchased a coffee, a paperback book, and a package of cookies from the kiosk. Carefully carrying the hot coffee in one hand while pulling her luggage with the other, she found a spot on a bench near her gate. She set her carry-on luggage on the floor in front of her seat, removed her glasses from her pocketbook, rested her cup of coffee on top of the luggage, and settled down with her book to wait for the boarding call. A man who also had carry-on luggage, a coffee, and a newspaper sat down at the same time just to her right.

As the woman read, she reached over to her right and took a cookie from the package. It tasted good.

Much to her surprise, the man seated next to her also took a cookie from the package! The woman was surprised, incredulous. She thought about saying something but decided to let it go. She didn't want to make a scene.

She ate another cookie. After a moment, the man, who was apparently absorbed in reading his newspaper, reached over, and helped himself to another cookie, again without saying a word.

By now the woman was doing a slow boil! She was having difficulty concentrating on her book. She couldn't believe how cheeky he was, how presumptuous and rude! She looked over at him, hoping that if he knew that she had seen him take the cookies, he would take the hint. The man looked up from his paper and smiled at her.

She ate another cookie. He ate another cookie. She drew the package a little closer to her as she ate. It did no good. The man was obviously clueless! He matched her cookie for cookie. There was really no other place where she could put the cookies, not with her coffee in one hand and her book in the other. So, she and the man continued the ritual.

Finally, there was only one cookie left in the package. The woman, who was now bordering on rage, wanted to see if the man would eat the cookie himself or if he would leave it for her. So, she waited. Much to her surprise, the man broke the cookie in two, ate half, and left the other half for her!

Her boarding call came. She gathered up her belongings, cast a dirty look at the man, who responded with a smile, and stormed away.

When she was fully settled in her seat, she opened up her carry-on luggage to put her book away. Much to her surprise, she found the package of cookies she had purchased from the kiosk, unopened, just where she had put it!

It was *the man's cookies* that the two of them had been sharing!

Like I said, has this--or something like this--ever happened to you? As the story unfolded, I suspect you were identifying with the woman. You were picturing being the woman, having someone take something that was yours. You were picturing giving the person dirty looks or utilizing other forms of non-verbal communication (I would rather not be specific here), but the person is obviously clueless. I suspect you were thinking of how insensitive some people can be, how narcissistic, how absorbed in their feelings of entitlement.

And that is true. People *can* be insensitive and clueless. They can intrude on our space. They can cross boundaries that we do not want them to cross. Remember, the person could also be a group of people, like the government or society or culture or religion—something or someone who intrudes on our God-given and God-inspired call to individuation. There are certainly times when we need to claim what is ours, to affirm our individuality, to defend our own space.

But that isn't the lesson in this story. Remember, as we enter into the stewardship season, we are exploring the spiritual dimensions of stewardship, of giving. It is in this light that we should view this little vignette.

As I said, we can all identify with the woman. We know what it is like to have someone take something that is ours. We can also identify with her at the end of the story. We know the feeling of chagrin that emerges from the realization that we have been operating out of a certain assumption or a certain set of assumptions—and this assumption or set of assumptions proved to be wrong.

Like the woman, we either started with or we formed the assumption very quickly. Once we have the assumption, which the Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget would call a schema, each succeeding act on the part of the other person is quickly assimilated into the already-existing schema. With each succeeding act, we become more and more convinced of not only what the person is doing but why the person is doing it. We become convinced that we know the person's motives.

Then, suddenly, we have an epiphany! We realize that our initial assumption was wrong!

Have you ever done this? Have you ascribed certain motives to a person's actions, motives which you later found were not true of the person? The story can serve as a reminder that we would be wise to move a little slower in ascribing motives. Since we know so little about our own motives, especially those that are unconscious, we should have a little more humility when we ascribe certain motives to other people.

I hope we all know the feeling of embarrassment, the feeling of remorse that attended the woman's epiphany at the end of the story. I say "I hope" because if you have never had this experience, you are probably not given to a regular practice of self-reflection. The woman had not actually done any harm to the man or to the relationship, unless you consider dirty looks and bad thoughts harmful. But she did some harm to herself by harboring the thoughts she had! A Buddhist would say that these thoughts caused suffering--first to herself, and then, secondarily, to the man, to her relationship with the man.

Now I want us to stretch a little! I want us to identify with the man. Picture yourself settled on a bench at the airport with your package of cookies on your left, your coffee neatly resting on top of your carry-on luggage, and enough time before your flight to read the newspaper. A woman comes up, settles in beside you--and begins to eat your cookies!

How would you feel? Wait! A better question is, how did the man in our little vignette feel? All we know from the vignette is that he smiled at the woman as she ate his cookies. How could he smile at someone who was eating his cookies? Why wasn't he as upset, as agitated as the woman, who mistakenly thought that someone was eating *her* cookies? How could he go on calmly reading the paper, taking a cookie every now and then, observing that the woman matched him cookie for cookie? Then, to boot, the woman gives *him* dirty looks! What does he do? He smiles.

I don't know if this is a stretch for you, but this is a stretch for me! I find it difficult to stay inside the man in the vignette. What inside the man, what kind of schema, what kind of religious orientation would enable him to calmly watch the woman eat his cookies? She is

eating what is his! Without being invited! Without asking for or obtaining permission! *She* is eating *his* cookies! He continues to read the newspaper. And he smiles.

I have a lot of respect for the man. I think he had to know something special about life. I suspect he was either a Buddhist or a Christian—a real Buddhist or a real Christian.

Buddhists say that most of the unnecessary suffering we experience in life is caused by ignorance, delusion, or grasping. This is certainly true of the woman. Her delusion, her disordered thinking, was her incorrect assumption that the cookies were hers. Her grasping was an outward expression of her egocentricity, her determination to hold onto her cookies, to protect them, to keep them for herself. This caused her to suffer mental anguish, the emotions that attend anger. Had she lashed out at the man, she would also have caused suffering for him and damaged their relationship.

The man, we should notice, did not suffer. He *knew* the cookies were his. He might even have suspected that the woman was confused, that she thought the cookies were hers. But rather than make a scene, he let it go. Perhaps, if he were a Buddhist or a Christian, he realized that the cookies did not really belong to him—even though he had bought them only a few minutes earlier at the kiosk. Perhaps he realized that *nothing* really belongs to us, that it is given to us by God and that it belongs to God. Perhaps he saw God or Jesus in the woman. He certainly was not caught up in grasping, in his egocentric attachment to the cookies. This is why he could not only let them go happily; he could share his very last cookie with the woman.

In the first of our gospel lessons this morning, Jesus tells his listeners that when someone sues you for your coat, give that person your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

In Jesus' day, the occupying Roman soldiers had certain rights—but the Jewish citizens had certain rights as well. This, by the way, was an amazingly profound insight by the Romans into the best way to rule a conquered people. If it were cold outside and the soldier needed a coat, he could take it from a Jewish citizen. The soldier could take the coat, but no more. If a Roman soldier needed help carrying his pack, his gear, he could force a Jew to carry the pack one mile, but no more. This was what could legally be demanded of the oppressed people of that country.

What Jesus says is fascinating! Jesus tells us that if we give it freely, it cannot be taken from us. If it is taken from us by dint of force, we will probably feel resentment. This causes suffering. If we give it freely--no resentment, no suffering. In fact, if we have the correct attitude not only toward the other person but also toward our possessions, we will give more than

is asked. We will give our cloak as well. We will gladly carry the soldier's pack the second mile.

The woman sitting next to us in the airport (or in our daily life) cannot take our cookies if we give them to her--down to the very last cookie!

If we give freely, it cannot be taken from us! The man in the vignette gave freely. Because he could do so, the cookies could not be taken from him. People can't compel you to do what you do freely.

This is a powerful teaching about stewardship. On occasion, just before the offering, a minister might remind his/her/their flock, "freely we have received, freely give." This little saying, which I think is a paraphrase of some biblical passages, addresses what a Buddhist would call our delusion: the woman thinking "It's mine; it belongs to me." "Someone is taking what's mine." However, in reality, it doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God. Everything is part of God--us, the woman sitting next to us, and the cookies.

Many of Jesus' teachings address the matter of grasping. One of Jesus' well-known parables is the Parable of the Rich Fool. The parable tells us of a man who stored up treasure on earth instead of being rich toward God, rich in his deep relationship with God. Jesus tells us that the man's hoarding is basically stupid, that he would be better advised to build up treasure in heaven where one's "possessions" do not rust, where moths do not devour, where thieves cannot break in and steal.

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus tells his followers to let go of their attachment to their coat, and also to their cloak. He tells them to trust in God to provide. From the description of the early Christian community in the book of Acts, it is doubtful whether Jesus or his disciples owned any personal property. When you own no property, you will not say "These are my cookies." "I own them." "I want them." "I have no intention of sharing them."

This is an important teaching of Jesus. In the second of our scripture lessons this morning, the one from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he lays down his life for his friends. He makes it clear that he is not being executed against his will. He says, "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

In this passage, Jesus is telling his disciples (and us) that the Roman soldiers cannot take his life--if he gives it freely. He tells us that his death, his crucifixion, is not an injustice; it is a gift. Remember, someone can't take something from you if you give it freely. If you give freely, your heart will be filled with love. If it is taken from you unjustly, your heart will be

filled with resentment, with anger, with rage, with a desire for revenge--just the sort of emotions that poison your soul.

We are entering into our stewardship season. The gift of your pledge is important financially to our church. More important to you is what is in your heart. There is a spiritual dimension to giving, to pledging, to stewardship.

As I mentioned on Reformation Sunday, if we were to try to manipulate you into giving or giving more, we would be robbing you of a spiritual grace. We do not want you to give out of guilt, duty, or obligation. We do not want you to give because you are pressured. We want you to give freely. If you understand Jesus' teaching, you will go the second mile in your giving.

In the week, the month, the year to come, you can adopt the little vignette you heard this morning as a spiritual exercise. You can begin by picturing yourself as the woman. As you identify with her, remember to become more cautious about your assumptions. The vignette calls you to challenge your delusions when it comes to ownership of anything. We should try to see God not only in ourselves but also in the other woman, and also in the cookies. We can let the exercise remind us to be on our guard against grasping, the kind of attachments that lead to suffering.

Then picture yourself as the man. Picture not only letting the woman eat your cookies, but not having it bother you. Picture yourself smiling at her, even when she is throwing dirty looks your way. Picture sharing your very last cookie with her, even when your gift is not appreciated. As you picture this, you will call forth this part of yourself. Then you will find that not only will you give more, but that no one can take anything from you.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **A RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

The Lebanese prophet and mystic Kahlil Gibran, in his spiritual guide entitled *The Prophet*, helps us understand the importance of giving. Gibran (speaking through “the prophet,” or the prophet speaking through Gibran) says,

*You give but little when you give of your possessions.  
It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.*

*For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard,  
For fear you may need them tomorrow.  
And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the over-prudent dog burying bones in the  
trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city?  
And what is fear of need but need itself?  
Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable?*

Gibran's "prophet" sounds a lot like Jesus, who said,

*"Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and  
where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourself treasures in heaven, where  
neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where  
your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:20)*

When Jesus calls us to be faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us, he is not just talking about our property; he is not just talking about our stocks and bonds, our wealth; he is talking about our heart. He is telling us that when we harbor a dread of thirst when our well is full, we suffer the thirst that is unquenchable.

It is in this spirit, the spirit of true stewardship, that we return that which God has given us to God, to the creation of God's kingdom on earth.

Let us consecrate the offerings that we place in the offering plate and on the altar of our hearts and dedicate them to your ongoing creative work in the world. Bless our church with all wisdom in their use, that they may truly go to bring about your kingdom on earth.