

DON'T EAT MY COOKIES!

(11/14/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 5:38-42
John 10:11-18

“Freely you have received, freely give.” (Mt. 10:8 KJV)

This morning, as we enter the Stewardship season in the life of our little church, and as we celebrate the national and, also, the religious holiday of Thanksgiving, I invite you to join me in a little thought experiment. I will tell you a story and ask how you would respond if you were the person or persons in the story. I feel comfortable doing this because this is how Jesus taught. Jesus taught in parables, in little stories.

One little caveat—or perhaps it’s a big one. I need you to imagine that this little scenario takes place in a non-COVID world, a world where you could sit next to a stranger on a subway or in an airport, a world where you could hug or shake hands with a friend, a world where people could touch each other or simply hand something to one another, like a communion tray or the light from a candle on Christmas Eve without fearing that you are endangering the other person or yourself. Difficult, isn’t it—even to imagine? I find that sad. However, that’s not the point.

Getting back to the hypothetical thought experiment, it is possible that this may have happened to you--or something like this may have happened to you. Anyway, here we go.

A well-dressed businesswoman embarking on a business trip was in a busy airport terminal waiting for her plane to depart. Before settling down in the waiting area outside her gate, she purchased a coffee with milk--no sugar, a paperback book, and a package of cookies from the kiosk. Carefully carrying the hot coffee in one hand while pulling her carry-on luggage with the other, she found a spot on a bench near the entrance to the gate. She set her luggage on the floor in front of her seat, removed her glasses from a compartment at the top of the luggage, rested her cup of coffee on top of the luggage, the package of cookies on the bench just to her right, and settled down with her book to wait for the boarding call.

A casually dressed man, whom she recognized from the coffee line at the kiosk, was seated on the bench just to her right. The man also had carry-on luggage, coffee, and a newspaper he had purchased at the kiosk.

As the woman began to read her book, she took a sip of her coffee and then reached over to her right and took a cookie from the package. It tasted good.

Much to her surprise, the man seated to her right 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 seemed totally absorbed in his newspaper, reached to his left and helped himself to a second cookie, again without saying a word.

By now the woman was doing a slow boil! She found she was having difficulty concentrating on her book. She couldn't believe how presumptuous, how rude this stranger was! She looked over at him, disapprovingly, hoping that if he knew that she had seen him take the cookies, he would take the hint. The man briefly looked up from his paper and smiled at her. If this was intended to make her feel better, it didn't work.

She ate another cookie. He ate another cookie. She drew the package of cookies a little closer to her, but to no avail. The man was obviously clueless! He matched her cookie for cookie. There was no other place where she could put the cookies, with her coffee on her luggage, her book in one hand, and another passenger seated immediately to her left. 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 and ate half.

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 settled in her seat, she opened her carry-on luggage to put her book and glasses away. Much to her surprise, she found the package of cookies she had purchased from the kiosk, unopened, just where she had put it—in her luggage.

It was the man's cookies that they had been sharing.

As the story unfolded, I suspect you identified with the woman. You pictured having some stupid, insensitive person thoughtlessly intrude on your space or take something that is yours. You pictured giving the person dirty looks or utilizing other forms of non-verbal communication (I am not going to be specific about possible non-verbal communications), but the dirty looks, the expressions of disapproval prove to no avail because the person is clueless. I suspect you were thinking of how insensitive some people can be, how self-involved, how oblivious to the needs or feelings of others.

And it's true. People *can* be insensitive and clueless. They can intrude on our space. They can violate boundaries we do not want them to cross. The person could also be a group of people, like the government or internet providers. There are certainly times when we need to claim what is ours, to defend our boundaries, to create our own space.

But that isn't the lesson in this story. In this stewardship season, we explore the spiritual dimensions of stewardship, of giving. It is in this light that we should view our little vignette.

We can identify with the woman for we know what it is like to have someone take or destroy something that is ours. We can also identify with her at the end of the story. We know the feeling that attends the realization that we have been operating out of a certain assumption or a certain set of assumptions. We either started with or formed the assumption very quickly. Each succeeding act on the part of the other person is assimilated into what Jean Piaget called the already-existing schema; it strengthens it. We become more and more convinced of not only what the person is doing but also the person's motives, *why* the person is doing it.

Then, suddenly, usually sometime later, we have an epiphany. We realize 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 grounded in reality? The story reminds us to move a little slower in ascribing motives to people, in assuming that we know what psychological dynamics gave rise to a specific behavior. Since we know so little about our own motives, some of which are unconscious, we should be more reticent to ascribe specific motives to other people.

We all know the feeling of embarrassment and remorse that attended the woman's epiphany at the end of the story. She had not actually done any harm to the man or to their 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 and primarily to herself and then, secondarily, to the man, to her relationship with the man.

Now I want you to stretch. I want you 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 just enough time before your flight departs to read the day's newspaper. A woman comes up, settles in beside you--and begins to eat your cookies!

How would you feel? How did the man feel? All we know from the story is that he smiled at the woman as she ate half of 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 his newspaper, 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 about you, but this is a stretch for me. It's difficult to stay inside the man. What inside the man, what kind of schema, what kind of religious or spiritual orientation would enable him to calmly watch the woman eat his cookies? She is eating what is his! Without being invited to do so! Without obtaining permission to do so! She is eating *his* cookies! He continues to read the newspaper. And he smiles.

I think this man knew something special about life.

Buddhists say that most of the suffering we experience is caused by ignorance, delusion, or grasping. This is certainly true of the woman. Her ignorance was her lack of knowledge about the man, what kind of person he was. Her delusion, her false thought, was her assumption that the cookies they were eating were hers. Her grasping was 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 verbally or physically, she would also have caused suffering for him.

In contrast, the man 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 he let it go. Perhaps he realized that the cookies did not really belong to him. 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 Jesus in the woman. He certainly was not caught up in grasping, in his attachment to the cookies. This explains 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 your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go a second mile as well.

In Jesus' day, the Roman soldiers that occupied Israel had certain "rights," but the Jewish citizens also had rights. The rights afforded to the occupied people may have stemmed from the Romans being a civilized people, or it may have stemmed from their experience conquering various countries, their realization that if you go too far in abusing the conquered populace, you sow the seeds of rebellion. If it were cold and the soldier needed a coat, he could take one from a Jewish citizen. The soldier could take one coat, but no more. If a Roman soldier needed help

carrying his gear, he could force a Jew to carry the pack one mile, but no farther. 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 something freely, it cannot be taken from us! If something is taken from us by dint of force, we will probably experience anger or feel resentment. This emotional response 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 be able to give more than is asked. We will give not only our coat, but also our cloak. We will gladly carry the soldier's pack the second mile.

The woman sitting next to us in the airport cannot take our cookies if we give them to her--down to sharing 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. In the King James translation of Matthew 10:8, we read, "freely you have received; freely give." This teaching of Jesus stands as a corrective to what a Buddhist would call our delusion: e.g., the woman thinking "It's mine," "It belongs to me," "Someone is taking what's mine." But what if "it" doesn't belong to us? What if "it" belongs to God? What if *everything* is part of God--us, the woman sitting next to us, and the cookies?

Many of Jesus' teachings address the matter of what Buddhists call attachment or grasping. Take, for example, the parable of the rich fool. In this parable, the man stores up treasure on earth instead of being rich toward God. Jesus tells us that his hoarding is in vain, that he would be better advised to build up treasure in heaven where possessions do not rust, where moths do not devour, where thieves cannot break in and steal.

Jesus tells his followers to let go of their attachment to their coat, 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 have no intention of sharing them."

This is an important teaching. In our scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he lays down his life for them. He makes it clear that he is not being executed. 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 says that the Roman soldiers cannot take his life if he gives it freely. He tells us that his death is not an injustice, it is a gift. 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.

The thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart speaks to this in his commentary on The Lord's Prayer. Eckhart, whose writings I would like us to study when our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study and Growth Group resumes, draws our attention to the way this prayer is worded: that it is not about “me;” it is about “us.” He says,

Bread is given to us so that not only we might eat but that we recognize others in need, lest anyone say “my bread” is given to me instead of understanding that it is ours, given to me, to others through me and to me through others.

We are entering into our stewardship season. The gift of your pledge is important financially to our church. By financially supporting our church's ministry, by being actively involved in our church's ministry, we are being the mystical body of Christ; we are serving as Christ's presence, Christ's hands in the world. There is a spiritual dimension to giving, to pledging, a spiritual dimension to our stewardship.

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 want you to give freely! If you truly understand Jesus' teaching, you will go the second mile in your giving. As you do this, you are no longer “doing” church; you are “being” church in the same way that the original disciples were the church.

Jesus tells us that it is not what we have, what we possess, that makes us who we are; it is what we share; it is what we give away. This is true of love. It is true of caring and compassion. It is true of time, of “our” time. It is true of our life. And it is true of our wealth. As he reminds us in the parable of the rich fool, we become spiritually rich when we “store up treasure in heaven.”

In the days to come, remember this little story. It can be used as a spiritual exercise. First picture yourself as the woman. As you identify with her, remember to become more cautious about your assumptions. Challenge your delusions when it comes to ownership of anything. Try to see God not only in yourself, but also in the man, in the cookies. Let the

exercise remind you to be on your 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 to your church and to life, but you will realize that no one can take anything from you.

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November 14, 2021