

First Presbyterian Church
“On the Road Again: Lesson Along the Way II”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Nehemiah 8:13-18; Luke 6:27-38

I decided I wanted to get my bike back so that I could go riding with my daughter, Katie. I didn't have my bike because I had loaned it to Dathan, a friend of mine, who had been coming to our church. He needed the bike because he had had a run in with the law and had his driver's license suspended. Since I was not using my bike regularly, I thought it would be a nice thing to let him have it for a while. But then, Dathan quit coming around. He was not showing up to church. He was not returning my phone calls. My next move was to go to the apartment he was renting and get the bike back. I knocked a couple of times and Dathan came to the door. “Hey Doc,” he said, “It's been a while.” “Yep,” I said, “Just came to get my bike back.” “Oh, I forgot to tell you. I pawned your bike to buy drugs. And I think the time has run out for you to get it back from the shop. Sorry about that.” I have to say, knowing Dathan as I did, it should not have surprised me that he pawned my bike for drugs, but what I realized on the way home was that giving could be costly.

I wonder this morning, how many of you have ever found yourself in a similar situation...not meaning that you loaned someone a bike and they sold it for drugs, but that your giving cost you? Maybe it cost you financially, or emotionally, or perhaps even physically. That you gave and you lost...lost something that you might not ever get back. What I think these incidents tend to do is to make us wary and rather than simply give, we verify. We make sure the people are who they say they are, have the needs they express, and only then, give. This is what we do with the Deacons' Fund here at First Presbyterian. When someone asks for rent assistance, we check with the landlord. When someone needs utility help, we check with their utility provider. When someone needs gas, we give gas cards. We do so because over the years we have discovered, and I know this will surprise you, that there are people who will lie to us, hoping that we will simply hand over a handful of cash. In a sense, we work on a system of trust, but verify. But what if...what if...trust and verify is not the way of Jesus?

I ask that question because in Jesus' sermon on the plain, notice not a sermon on the mount but a sermon on the plain, Jesus implies that we are to engage in radical risk, meaning that we are to give everything away without either expecting anything in return or worrying about what the person does with what we give. And giving in this part of Jesus' sermon is not just about giving things, but includes giving of ourselves. Listen again. *“Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again...If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.”* Jesus seems to be saying that we to be costly givers. We are to simply give away, without expecting anything, including thanks, from those to whom we give it. This hardly seems like sound advice, so why would Jesus give it?

The answer can be found in the second half of verse 35 into verse 36, *“Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the*

wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” In other words, Jesus offers this advice because this is the way God interacts with humanity. God is a costly giver. Consider how God engages with the world. God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. God offers protection not just to the good but sometimes to the not so good. God’s plan from the beginning of time was not just to save certain perfect people into heaven, but to restore all of creation. God’s work in Jesus Christ was done because God so loved the world, and not just the best of the world. God called a man named Saul to come and work for him, even though Saul was guilty of murder. And when God calls and gives in these ways God never demands that everyone toe the line and offer perfect obedience. Granted, God would love perfect obedience and appreciation, not because God has a fragile ego, but because to offer perfect obedience and gratitude would create a world in which all persons thrived, and creation was restored. No, every day God is a costly giver, again and again and again. Knowing this, what then ought to be our response to this costly giving of God?

My response is that we are called to a costly gratitude and costly attitude. We are called to be those who engage in costly gratitude. We can see this kind of gratitude in the folks in Nehemiah as they celebrated the Festival of the Booths. The Festival of the Booths is a harvest festival. The Jewish people would, and still do, celebrate this festival by going out into the fields, building small shelters, and giving thanks to God for the harvest that had been given to them. What made this first festival so meaningful was that the people understood that God had given them an amazing harvest even though they had forgotten about God. That God had loved them and supported them even though they had not been obedient to God’s Torah. That God had shown them costly love. Their response in this festival was to stop working...remember it is harvest...and spend time worshipping God. This meant they ceased harvesting, storing, or selling their grain. This was costly gratitude.

The second way we are called to respond is with a costly attitude. This is an attitude of living loosely and lovingly with what we have been given by God. This attitude is based on the belief that all we have is from our creator and is simply on loan to us. Therefore, our attitude ought to be one of a willingness to offer who we are and what we have without counting the cost; to see them as investments God has made in us that are intended to bear returns in others. Let me be clear here, though. I am not saying to give everything you have to every scammer who comes along. I am also not saying that you should allow anyone to abuse you, whether it is emotionally or financially. What I am saying is that if we live with a radical attitude of sharing, the results might not be loss, but gain. Jesus puts it this way, *“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* For you see, God never ceases being generous to us. God never forgets us.

What happened to Dathan? I lost touch with him for a long period of time. Then one day, out of the blue he called from North Carolina. He told me that he and his wife had both gotten clean and had good jobs. Their son was doing well, and they had found a church. Then he told me how grateful he was that the church and I had been so kind and supportive of them, even when they had not always deserved it. That phone call made losing the bike worth it.

My challenge to you this week is to ask yourselves, how am I showing costly gratitude toward God and offering a costly attitude in living loosely with all that I have been given.