

13th December 2020 – ‘Giving and receiving’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC Love will guide us, Lisa Redfern

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3_3BCDq874

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. Welcome to those of you here in our beautiful sacred space. And welcome, too, to those of you joining us online or in print. It's so good to share this time with you, too. Together we each contribute to making a holy time for us all.

Each of us comes here with our own stories, our own ways of making sense of life and the universe, our own troubles and our own blessings. Here we can each find a place of acceptance and an invitation to be fully ourselves. Here may give what we can give, and receive that which we are given, in the knowledge that we are each an integral part of the great ebb and flow of the universe.

I'll start by lighting our chalice this morning, as a symbol of our free religious faith.

If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.

May this flame remind us of the eternal gift of light.

May we receive it gladly and follow it wherever it may lead us. Amen

Today's theme is giving and receiving. And I'd like to start with some words by Parker J Palmer:

'When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself - and me - even as I give it away. Only when I give something that does not grow within me do I deplete myself and harm the other as well, for only harm can come from a gift that is forced, inorganic, unreal.'

PRAYER We come to a time of prayer.

Divine Spirit, Source of All

We are here today with our concerns as well as our joys, our fears and also our hopes, our loneliness and our attachments. May we lay them all down in your presence.

May we become more aware of your compassionate presence and your guidance in our lives, and more thankful for the many blessings and gifts that nurture and sustain us through each day.

In this moment may we bring into our hearts and minds those we know and love who are struggling. As we hold them in our loving thoughts we ask that they may find whatever strength, support and comfort they need to see them through at this time.

May we hold, too, those people unknown to us, wherever they may be, who feel in this moment alone, in pain, or afraid. Even though we may feel powerless to help them, we pray they may find solace and consolation in the midst of their suffering.

Divine Spirit, Source of All, be with us, now and always. Amen.

HYMN: 90 Let us give thanks and praise (Purple)

Let us give thanks and praise for the gifts which we share,
for our food and our friendship, for water and air,
for the earth and the sky and the stars and the sea,
and the trust we all have in God's love flowing free.

Give a shout of amazement at what life can bring,
put your heart into raising the song all can sing.
What a world we could build with our minds and our hands
where the people live freely and God understands.

Let us give of our best with the tools we shall need,
use our eyes, hands and brains so that we may succeed.
Inspire us to cultivate what we have sown
so that nature and nurture make a world we may own.

We adore you, great Mother, O help us to live
with a love for each other that each one can give.
Let the pain of our brothers and sisters be faced
and the healing of all souls on earth be embraced.

STORY: The Emperor's Gift, from Wisdom Stories, Margaret Silf

There was once a poor, penniless beggar, who sat in the streets of an Indian town, day after day, begging passersby for a little rice. At night he would sleep on his mat with only a few rags to protect him against the cold night air.

Most days, he would be given enough rice to make himself a meal at night, and enough coppers to buy a little firewood, to cook the rice. And so his life continued, day after day. Until one day he heard that the Emperor was coming to town to make a state visit.

'Surely,' he thought, 'the Emperor is a good and stately man. He will give me good gifts. He won't pass me by with only a handful of rice.' So the next day he made sure he was sitting on the route the Emperor's carriage was taking.

Soon the sound of the imperial procession could be heard, and the beggar took up his position on the roadside. As the Emperor's coach approached, he got ready to step out and beg for alms. But to his great surprise the Emperor himself got out of the coach, walked up to the beggar, greeted him warmly, and asked if he could spare a handful of rice!

Well the beggar was astonished! Here was he, a poor man, with nothing, and yet this powerful, wealthy Emperor dared to ask HIM for rice! He was furious. But he couldn't really refuse the Emperor's request, so very reluctantly he counted out five grains of rice from his meagre supply and gave them to the Emperor, who received them most graciously, thanked the beggar warmly, and then went on his way.

That night the beggar began to prepare his meal. As he washed the rice he noticed something gleaming among the grains. It was a small rice-sized nugget of gold! And then he noticed another. And another. He sifted through the rice with the utmost care, and in fact there were five nuggets of gold. Five. No more.

He thought back to his encounter with the Emperor. For each of the five grains of rice he had so reluctantly given to the Emperor, he now had a nugget of gold. The Emperor had returned his grudging gift with its equivalent in gold.

‘How mean and foolish I have been!’ he exclaimed. ‘How I wish I had given the Emperor every grain of rice I possessed!’

READING: Alfred North Whitehead (English mathematician and philosopher)

The secret of happiness lies in knowing this: that we live by the law of expenditure. We find the greatest joy not in getting, but in expressing what we are. There are tides in the ocean of life, and what comes in depends on what goes out. The currents flow inward only where there is an outlet. Nature does not give to those who will not spend; her gifts are merely loaned to those who will not use them.

Empty your lungs and breathe. Run, climb, work, and laugh; the more you give out, the more you shall receive. Be exhausted, and you shall be fed. Our gladness is not in taking and holding, but in doing, the striving, the building, the living. It is a higher joy to teach than to be taught. It is good to get justice, but better to do it; fun to have things, but more fun to make them. The happy person is the one who lives the life of love.

OFFERINGS

This morning we are collecting gifts for our local Food Bank, and you are invited now to bring them forward.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE - My Lord Has Come, Will Todd, Giltspur Singers

<https://youtu.be/zpnD5qiVzJ0>

COMMENTARY

I feel a bit sorry for the beggar in the story, don't you? After all, why would he choose to give generously to the Emperor, of all people? The Emperor clearly had everything he needed and yet the beggar had so very little. I wonder how I'd feel if the Queen came to visit and asked *me* for money?

What would I do? I reckon I'd feel I had to give her something – she's the Queen, after all! - and it couldn't just be a few pennies, or even a pound. That would seem insulting. I expect I'd be searching for a note – and wondering if could I get away with a fiver? Or

would it have to be more? £10? £20? The beggar seems to have gone through a similar thought process. He felt he ought to give the Emperor something – after all it's difficult to refuse the Emperor! – and it feels like he calculated that 5 grains of rice was the least he could reasonably get away with. How was he to know that whatever he gave would be paid back in gold!

But of course we're not meant to take this story literally. And it's not really about Emperors and beggars – or Queens. So what is this story trying to tell us?

Well I think we can make the necessary leap of imagination to see that the Emperor is probably symbolizing something rather greater still: God, perhaps, or Brahmin, as this is an Indian story, or the Universe, or Life. And that in this tale the beggar is like each of us. Like the beggar, we too are all being asked to give of ourselves to the Divine nature, and maybe it's also suggesting that, like the beggar, we might too begrudge this and give as little as we can.

However, clearly the story shows us that whatever we give will be warmly received, and what's more we'll receive back far more. It will be in equal measure but in much greater worth. So, five grains of rice will be returned as five nuggets of gold.

Jesus said something very similar in Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

What exactly are we being asked to give? Is this about grains of rice? Well maybe, if that's what's needed. Today, for example, we have been asked to bring gifts of food and basic provisions because we know that sadly many people in our city simply don't have enough to eat. We are giving what is asked of us, and what we know is needed at this time. And I also believe we are giving without any expectation of receiving anything in return, except perhaps the knowledge that we'll experience the joy that comes simply from giving and sharing. And that's already worth far more to us than we've given.

In other situations we may give of our money, our talents or our time – according to what we have and what is needed – and many of you do this here. And may do it similarly

without expectation of receiving anything other than the increased sense of belonging and wellbeing and fulfillment that flows from being generous of spirit.

And yet I think both this story and Jesus's words would go further still. They are pointing not only to charity, and compassion, and self-fulfilment, but towards a different level of giving altogether.

I believe they are suggesting it's when we give more deeply of ourselves - to God, or Spirit, or Life - that we begin to receive gifts greater than we could have imagined. It's when we start to let go of our self-interests preoccupations, when we drop our pretences and prejudices, when we release ourselves from the habits and patterns that limit us, and finally surrender our self will to the greater Divine will, that is when then we receive gifts beyond our imagining. For it is only then that we will receive understanding. It is then that we will receive peace. It is then we'll receive unconditional love. And – metaphorically – enter the Kingdom of Heaven, here on earth.

And that's worth more than any number of grains of rice *or* nuggets of gold.

Alfred North Whitehead says: 'The happy person is the one who lives the life of love.'

Parker J. Palmer says: 'When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself - and me - even as I give it away.'

But Jesus says 'whoever loses their life for my sake will find it'. And a similar message is offered by all the great religions. So may it be so.

CLOSING WORDS Elizabeth Tarbox

Do you think the world doesn't need you? Think again!

You cleanse the world with your breathing;

you beautify the world with your thinking and acting and caring.

Don't stay home and suffocate on your sorrow;

go outside and give yourself to the world's asking.

CLOSING MUSIC Though I may speak with bravest fire.

<https://youtu.be/etleXICozCI>