

The Offer of a Lifetime

I Kings 17:8-16

June 10, 2007

There was this fellow who was downtown to do some business. He was only in the building for a few minutes. When he came out he saw a police officer writing a parking ticket. He approached the officer and said, "Come on, how about giving a person a break?" The officer ignored the man and continued to write the ticket, at which point the guy called him a Nazi.

The police officer glared at the man and wrote him another ticket for having worn tires. Then he was called a doughnut eating Gestapo. The officer finished the second ticket and proceeded to write another one.

This went on for about twenty minutes or so. The more the officer was abused, the more tickets he wrote. Finally the officer was starting to get writers cramp, so he walked away. Another fellow who was standing by watching all of this happen approached the first fellow and asked him why he abused the officer so badly because now there were a mass of parking tickets on the windshield. He said, "Personally, I don't care. I came downtown on a bus and the car he was putting the tickets on had a bumper sticker that said, 'Hillary in '08.'" (If you are a Democrat, you can substitute Rudy Giuliani. The punch line is the same).

We usually think that more is better. But not in all cases.

Every once in a while, Toni and I fantasize what we would do if we won the lottery. Now, to be up front with you, we don't play the lottery, and as I understand it, you have to play to win – even though your chances of winning are less than your chances of being hit by lightning. In fact, we believe that gambling in all its forms is inconsistent with the Christian gospel, is dangerous for the community, and an unjust form of taxation on the poor - the people who can least afford it. That is why we so oppose the expansion of gambling in the state of Indiana. That is why we are disappointed in the governor who recently signed a bill allowing slot machines to be placed in race tracks, which we believe shouldn't be there in the first place.

We always joke that if we would win the lottery, we would have to win a lot, because we would have to leave the church. Our bishop would not be too happy with us. We couldn't win just a few thousand dollars; we would need to win big so that we could support ourselves because we wouldn't have a job anymore. And, in our way of thinking, it just isn't worth taking the chance.

There are some things, however, that I wouldn't mind winning. I wouldn't mind being Tasha Callister of Jacksonville, Florida who won the Ben and Jerry's "Do Us a Flavor" contest. According to an October 6, 2006 press release by the ice cream company, Ms. Callister was selected by 40,000 entrants for the best idea for a new ice cream flavor. Her's was called "Puttin' On the Ritz" and is a blend of Vanilla Ice Cream, Caramel and

Ritz Cracker Swirl with Chunks of Chocolate. She won an all expense paid trip to the ice cream factory in Vermont, as well as – and here is the good part – a year’s worth of free Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream.

They are having another contest called, “YO! I’m Your CEO!” One hundred word applications are being accepted. The winner will become CEO. Actually, I would rather win second prize. Second prize will be a lifetime supply of ice cream. Not too bad, huh?

Did you know that if your supply of underwear is running low, you can enter to win a lifetime supply of free underwear from Jockey? British Petroleum is sponsoring a contest in which you can win a lifetime supply of gasoline. But you’re going to have to have a tank to put that gas in, so the winner will receive a new Ford F-150 every five years for the rest of his or her life.

What would you like to win? Would you like to win a lifetime supply of Pepsi, or toilet paper, or M&M’s, Australian wine, symphony tickets, Indianapolis Colt’s tickets, groceries, haircuts, or tennis shoes?

The thing you have to remember about lifetime offers is that they are only as good as the company that offers them. If Ford gets taken over by Toyota, there go your new trucks. If the elastic market gets stretched too thin, there go your boxer shorts and sport bras. If global warming occurs too rapidly, there goes your ice cream.

One person who received a lifetime offer was the widow of Zarephath. Let’s try to remember what was happening here. Shortly after he began his prophetic ministry, sometime around 875 BCE, Elijah got embroiled in a controversy with King Ahab. Ahab, if you remember, was the king who married Jezebel, the foreign woman, a woman who worshiped foreign gods. She brought her gods with her and pretty soon Ahab had begun to worship them as well. He had begun to believe that these foreign gods were the ones who controlled the rain, and for that matter, all things on earth.

Elijah set out to change the king’s mind. He went to Ahab and said, “As surely as God lives, the God of Israel before whom I stand in obedient service, the next years are going to see a total drought – not a drop of dew or rain unless I say otherwise” (I Kings 17:1).

Ahab was a bully and even more so when prodded on by his devious wife. God knew that the king wouldn’t take these words from Elijah very easily so he advised the prophet to get out of town – quick. He told him to hide out over on the east side of the Jordan River. There he would have water to drink and God would feed him meat and bread, which would be delivered to him by ravens.

Apparently Elijah stayed there for awhile, but the brook dried up because of the drought. God then told him that he should travel back west toward the sea coast up around the city of Sidon, to a place called Zarephath. There, God said, he would find a woman who had been instructed to feed him.

So Elijah made the journey over to the coast. As he entered the village, he met this poor widow gathering a few sticks for firewood. He walked up to her and asked for a drink of water. As she went off to find the water, he said, "And while you're at it, would you bring me something to eat?"

I don't know what sort of look this woman gave Elijah. Was it a look of sad resignation? Was it a look that said, "You've got to be kidding? Do you think that I have any food to give you?" Was it a look of anger that said, "How can you ask something like that of me?" Who knows what her facial expressions betrayed. But her words communicated all that needed to be said.

"I don't have so much as a biscuit. I have a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a bottle; you found me scratching together just enough firewood to make a last meal for my son and me. After we eat it, we'll die."

But Elijah had good news for her. I'm not sure if she believed it at first, but it was still good news. "Don't worry about a thing. Go ahead and do what you've said. But first make a small biscuit for me and bring it back here. Then go ahead and make a meal from what's left for you and your son...The jar of flour will not run out and the bottle of oil will not become empty before God sends rain on the land and ends this drought."

In what is an incredible act of faith for this desperate woman, she followed Elijah's instructions and, just as he promised, she had an unending supply of flour and oil. She was a lifetime winner and her winnings were so much more impressive than any lottery.

Let me lift up for you three lessons I learned from this Scripture text. First, we have to understand that sometimes, there are some strings attached to our winnings. It required a response. She couldn't remain passive and just receive God's gifts. She was given the material resources, but she had to do the work of making the dough and baking it for supper. I believe that the same principle is at work in our lives. God gives us all we need, but we have to make something out of the raw materials.

Last week at Annual Conference, we ordained eleven people as elders to full time Christian ministry. We believe that God has given them enough gifts to fulfill their vows of Word, Order, Sacrament, and Service. But they have to use those gifts. They have to nurture those gifts. They have to increase those gifts. They have to be aware that those gifts can be squandered if they are not careful. Those gifts are the flour and the oil. The new ordinands have to make biscuits themselves.

But, on the other hand, God doesn't always attach strings to his gifts. Last week we talked about the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus didn't ask for a response from the hungry crowd. He didn't demand a certain course of action for those who were fed. He simply gave them food. When God fed Elijah, there were no strings attached. He simply fed him.

All of this calls for a certain level of sophistication in our skills of discernment. We have to be spiritually aware of the times when we simply, gratefully, and humbly accept God's gifts for what they are: free gifts of love. And we also have to be aware of those times when a response is required in order to make the gifts reach their full potential.

Also be aware that some of God's gifts last a lifetime while others last only as long as the need persists. For this woman, the gifts of flour and oil lasted only until the end of the drought. When the conditions were right, God had every expectation that this woman and her son would go back to work.

Secondly, God doesn't promise to give us what we want, but what we need. And there is a vast difference. God sustains us in times of drought, but doesn't necessarily spoil us when we are living in time of affluence and abundance.

In January, I finished paying off my car. It is really nice not to have to send in those payments each month now. But now I want a new car. The problem is that there is absolutely nothing wrong with my car. Sure, the dog got her nose all over the back windows and whenever I get in with a dark suit, there is plenty of dog hair on my pants and jacket to remind me of all the reasons why I don't like that dog. But there is absolutely nothing wrong with the car. I want a new one. I don't need a new one.

Try to remember that there are places in this world where the people of God give thanks for a new bicycle or a new pair of shoes or enough beans and rice to feed their families. There is a vast difference between what we want and what we need. Sometimes we don't know the difference, but God always does.

Third, this widow of Zarephath was a lifetime winner because whenever one is genuinely touched by the loving hand of God, the change lasts. No one is ever the same. She was a winner because she chose to respond to God. She accepted what God gave her and was faithful in her use of the gift.

At the beginning of the message, I said that any lifetime offer is only as good as the power that stands behind it. In the final analysis, Ben and Jerry's will not last. Ford will not last. The Indiana Lottery will not last. Jockey and British Petroleum will not last. But God will.

It is God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. When all else has been thrown into the dust bin of history, God and God's kingdom will still be standing.

If I could use that famous line from Vito Corleone: "That is an offer we can't refuse."