

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

THE EXTRAVAGANT GIFT GIVER

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

1 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

DIAGNOSIS: The Great Gift of the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Great Good Gift of the Law*

No doubt about it, the Law is a tremendous gift to the people of Israel. Its statutes and ordinances are so amazing, so very *just*, that other nations marvel—not just at the Israelite nation, but at the god who stands behind it. Here though comes the important caveat: Moses *begins* with the imperative, “So now, Israel,” meaning, (as we look at the chapters and verses preceding), now, Israel, now that you have a most unusual God who is “near” to you, who answers your prayers, who has established a steadfast relationship with you (my paraphrase), *now* do pay attention to his gifts because he gives them for your benefit. Don’t forget the ordinances, but especially, don’t forget the Giver who gives them.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Confusing the Gifter with the Gift*

A millennia plus after Moses’ reminder, Jesus asserted (in today’s Gospel reading) that the Israelites had ended up doing exactly what they had been warned against. Namely, they had focused so much on the *gift* that they had forgotten the One from whom the gift had come. (Maybe it was just too dazzling, too seductive to the ego to refuse.) Worse, they had ended up manipulating their Law-obedience into a means by which they could *merit* their own righteousness (right relationship with the Gifter)—a complete reversal of the original intent. Instead of the Law being a gift to enrich their lives, it had become a tool for self-aggrandizement, for righteousness-making. Moment of truth: Could this be true of us modern listeners as well?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Demolished*

Note verses 3 and 4, omitted by the lectionary designers, where Moses pauses to remind the Israelites what happened when some of

them had shifted their focus from Yahweh and instead worshiped an alternate god, Baal of Peor. God “destroyed” them (v. 4). One thousand, two thousand (and more) years later, the same destruction results when would-be people-of-God take it upon themselves to use the Law as a means of achieving their right-relationship with God, thus shifting their focus/worship from the Giver to the gift. God’s response today is the same as it was 2,000-some years ago... self-trusters will be destroyed—ironically by the very Gift (the Law) which they hold so dear.

PROGNOSIS: The Gift of the Giver’s Own Self

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Gift of the Giver’s Self*

Enter now Jesus of Nazareth, after millenia of failed Law-worshipping. Jesus announces that—wonder of wonders and hope for the hopeless—God takes no pleasure in destroying idolaters but rather has devoted himself to salvaging them! It seems the situation had become so dire that the Gifter must go to extraordinary lengths: He gives (to Israel and all the destroyed) a *new* gift: *his own self*! This New Gift we call Jesus. On the cross, the New Gift endures complete destruction for the sake of the destroyed. And then the gifting really escalates Easter morning as the Great Gifter raises Jesus from death. You could say he destroyed destruction. This destruction-demolition secures a new relationship between the destroyed and the Gifter—this time not based on *their* obedience but on *Jesus’* obedience.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Internalizing the New Gift*

Jesus urges all the destroyed (meaning everyone who has chosen the gift over the Giver) to turn from their destructive ways and take hold of him, meaning, trust *him* to get them/us through

their/our demolition. He *promises* he'll get them/us out of the wreckage heap and—get this, it'll blow your mind!—he'll plop us down right next to him, as equal siblings, in his Papa's lap. Talk about righting-the-relationship! Note the switcheroo—focus (and trust) shifts away from the Gift back to the Gifter, who gave himself. Those who trust the New Gift have no alternative but to dance with joyful gratitude.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Gifts are Enjoyed and Shared*

Er, actually, they do a little bit more....the newly gifted actually simultaneously do two things: First, they appreciate and enjoy all the gifts the Gift-Giver showers on them, and second, they start sharing those gifts. Then here's a new wonder to ponder....The New Gift (Jesus) fills his trusters up with himself (his Spirit) so much that, voila, they automatically, instinctively obey/observe the old gift, those statutes and the ordinances! How ironic, huh?