

**“Givenness and Gratitude” a sermon based on Luke 7:36 – 8:3 and Galatians 2:15-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 12 June 2016.**

In his book *Free of Charge* Miroslav Volf tells of the moment he sensed how great was a mother’s gift of her son given to Miroslav and Judy Volf for adoption.

The boy’s name was Nathaniel.

Nathaniel was now three month’s old and his mother had asked to see him.

So there they were: the mother and her ten year old daughter and the new parents and three month old Nathaniel - the first time the mother had seen her boy since he was two days old, when she had kissed him good-bye and given him to the new parents.

Miroslav Volf describes what he saw.

“The first thing I saw was a tear – a huge, unforgettable tear in the big brown eye of a ten year old girl. Then I saw the tears in her mother’s eyes. I sensed in those tears the ache that he, flesh of their flesh, was being brought to them for a brief visit by two strangers who were now his parents, and the affliction of knowing that the joy of loving him as a mother and sister would never be theirs.”

He came across these words from Aristotle which helped convey how great was the gift–

“Witness the pleasure that mothers take in loving their children. Some mothers put their infants out to nurse, and though knowing and loving them do not ask to be loved by them in return, if it be impossible to have this as well ... they retain their own love for them even though the children, not knowing them, cannot render them any part of what is due to a mother.”

A gift beyond description, a love that gives without being returned.

Miroslav Volf tells of what had happened three months before.

They had received a phone call giving twenty four hours’ notice of the possible adoption.

They had worked through the night to get everything ready, the house prepared.

They had driven to the hospital and, in their tired excitement had turned into a one way street the wrong way.

Flashing red and blue lights, police car, police man - there followed an abrupt, matter-of-fact, cold exchange. The police man was not interested in their predicament, their tiredness, their excitement, the gift.

They were endangering others.

Within an hour, Volf said, he received a ticket and a tender child.

At a time he was overwhelmed with gratitude, he contended with a different way of being.

We live this mix.

Much of our living involves selling and buying and earning.

Too soon we imagine we deserve what we have or we can imagine we have what we deserve, that we have earned what we have.

Robert Kuttner in his book *Everything for Sale*

“The person who volunteers time, who helps a stranger, who agrees to work for a modest wage out of commitment to the public good, who desists from littering even when no one is looking ... begins to feel like a sucker.”

In this mixed way of being, it is easy to miss the gift.

The book *the Little Prince* tells the story of a little prince who lives on a distant star where he looks after three volcanoes and a single rose.

He finds his way to earth where there are thousands of roses.

Says the prince to the earthling driver – “People where you live grow five thousand roses in one garden yet they don’t find what they are looking for. Yet what they are looking for could be found in a single rose. You have to look with the heart.”

The prince had only one rose - it was enough.

I am frequently humbled by how people who have little seem most grateful,

some who are unwell, give thanks for what they have;

some with tough prospects, who face even death, express gratitude;

some who live with pain, express faith.

Scarcity mixes with thankfulness.

Gratitude filled the air in the Pharisee’s house.

A woman had brought a jar of ointment. She bathed, kissed, anointed Jesus feet.

She was overwhelmed with gratitude at who he was and what he had done.

She knew Jesus as a before giver ... a before giver ... a forgiver.

Who gave to her regardless of whether or how she might respond.

She showed her gratitude in a house where people were judged according to reputation, status, whether they deserved it, whether they earned it.

This calculating house was filled with the smell, the aroma, the abundance, the tears of sheer gratitude at a before giving Jesus.

The woman's action gave us an insight into the nature of life.

What we have is not owed to us. What we have is not all earned.

It is God's creation, God's gift.

Sometimes we are awakened to gifts we can only receive.

- A stunning sunrise or sunset;
- Astounding colours in the middle of the night on a Dunedin horizon;
- The song of birds that greet us in the morning;
- The fragile smallness of a baby;
- The miraculous marvel of love;
- The purity of a courageous act.

Moments of palpable grace, windows into the givenness of life, into the nature of God.

God is no negotiator, No "do this and you get that".

God is a before giver who gives regardless of how we respond.

Life itself is breathed from God.

"What do you have that you did not receive?" asked the Apostle Paul.

Here at this table is the smell, the feel, the taste, the action of gratitude.

Central to what we do is the great prayer of thanksgiving, in which we name God's giving.

Here at this table, we remember who and how we are, receivers of life.

Here at this table we remember who we are, and how we are, thanks-givers.

For we are the woman, Who have been before-given.

And in this world where there is so much selling and buying, so much negotiating, so much getting according to what we do or what we pay, where people imagine they get what they earn ...

here we are simply thankful.

And in response, we bring to people, to this city, to this community, a jar of ointment,

to bathe, kiss, anoint people,

without thought of whether they deserve it,

or how they might respond,

in simple gratitude,

through Christ who lives in us.



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