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Coffee and Parables

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It's fascinating what you can see if you hang around CrossRoads Café, our parish's coffee shop ministry. Sometimes you can meet interesting people, like a gentleman I met on Thursday who chose CrossRoads as a place to have a cup of coffee and rest a while before a meeting. Sometimes you can see students in conversation with professors. And, every now and again, if you look closely, you can see one of Jesus' parables come to life through CrossRoads pay it forward program.

This program was inspired by places like rock and roll artist Jon BonJovi's restaurant called Soul Kitchen that serves delicious meals on pay it forward model. There is also a small café as close as Columbus that operates on this model of generosity that is completely contrary to the expected business model. Pay it forward functions like this: anyone can pay for someone's meal (or in CrossRoads' case a cup of coffee or coffee drink), so that anyone regardless of economic status can have a good meal or cup of coffee. Pay it forward models also offer additional ways to pay, such as working at dishwashing, waiting tables, cleaning, and those kinds of things. What I admire about the pay it forward model is that it isn't just a way to get something a person wants, at its heart and soul, the pay it forward model is an invitation into the community that restaurant or in our case coffee shop ministry really is and at the same time is an expression of God's love here on earth.

In a world of endless easy pay options, digital receipts, and on-line ordering, the pay it forward model is something rare and completely unexpected, and I have yet to see any textbook on business recommend or even mention it. Yet, to me, it is a daring expression of the Kingdom of God, which is why it is part of how our own CrossRoads Café operates.

If you happen to be in CrossRoads when a customer comes in and realizes they have left their money behind or didn't realize CrossRoads is still at a cash only status, and can let go of the worry and expectation that we absolutely have to provide one of those credit and debit card readers as soon as possible in order to look more textbook, more like everybody else and get more business, - if you can let that go - you might see something glorious happen.

It can be a lovely moment when our CrossRoads manager explains to the customer that it is quite alright that they don't have any cash on them, because through our pay it forward program someone has already paid for their cup of coffee.

The coffee isn't free, it has already been paid for. So, the manager smiles and says, "What would you like today?" And I don't think I've seen anyone instantly accept this generosity. First, they are usually incredulous. I have yet to meet anyone who is familiar or comfortable with the concept of generosity, abundance, and trust. I've heard one person say if they accept the coffee, they would be in debt to CrossRoads; and the manager patiently explained that is not the case, there is no debt because the coffee has already been paid for. Others say they feel guilty for taking something from someone else. Our manager just smiles and brilliantly explains that maybe that coffee is just for that person, right there, on that day. She also says the person can return at another day or time and pay for their coffee then or pay it forward so someone else can have a hot cup of coffee or hot hot chocolate on a dreary rainy day or a refreshing iced coffee on a warm day.

Eventually most people accept the offer, and order and receive a delicious cup of coffee and the conversation changes to talk about the brew of the day, where the coffee has come from, and the community that is being helped by our purchasing and serving that particular blend of coffee beans; or the manager listens to the person who often begins to talk about themselves: who they are, where they are from. It's as if they suddenly feel welcomed in a deeper way, and realize they mean more to us than money or profit. Some of these folks return. They may contribute to the pay it forward fund themselves and learn about the other ways customers can contribute. Some return regularly, cash in hand, because they enjoy the coffee, and being greeted by someone who knows who they are and remembers their name, and they return with something they want to talk about, because they have chosen to be welcomed into something that is more than a coffee shop. It's a tiny piece of God's Kingdom, God's Beloved Community that embodies God's love, a love I am learning is not only unknown it is unimaginable to so many.

And we have a few who out and out refuse to accept that which has already been paid for just for them. They are usually proud, knowing they have the resources, or suspect that they would be beholden to CrossRoads if they accept. Whatever about it makes them uncomfortable, a few folks don't want a cup of coffee that bad. And that's okay too. We simply make the invitation, the customer gets to make the choice.

While any business majors here might be cringing at all this, and making mental notes to tell me how to increase profits by reducing what is called "friction" the hard work I just described for those without cash to get a cup of coffee, I beg you to hear me out. Because there is more to our ministry than just business. And there is something else happening in that friction. There is the Kingdom of God. Remember,

the challenge from the bishop when he gave us the resources to start this cafe was if we could create a way for the church to participate in the local economy in a way that reflects the Kingdom of God, not just makes money. And when I hear the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel, it helps me see we are on the right path, the path of Jesus himself.

Most of us have been told this parable is about one person, a prodigal son. And that's too bad because that title misses most of what is going on in this parable; besides, that isn't what Jesus called it. Jesus called it the parable of a man who had two sons; making it about three people who are part of a family or community. One son or part of the family wanted what he wanted without care for his father or brother and when he got what he wanted he left and spent it the way he wanted. When he discovered that lifestyle was not sustainable, he decided to go back home. The other son never left home, but his steadfast obedience did not seem to bring him joy, as he was quick to point out the negative characteristics in his brother and even criticized his father for what the father chose to do to the younger son upon his return.

Most of the time when we look at this parable, we tend to focus on those brothers, who did not behave much like brothers. Each seemed out to get what he considered his own, without much care for the other. And perhaps we know of people who remind us of these brothers; the one who seems reckless, who doesn't think things through, but once that person hits rock bottom they return to where they hope they will be welcomed back. Or the one who seems loyal but wants some sort of additional compensation for that loyalty, who isn't loyal out of love or concern for others or the greater community and can become bitter and angry over time. Perhaps that is why we'd tend to focus on the brothers because they remind us of people we actually know, and systems we are familiar with.

But there is also the father in this parable to consider, whose generosity and forgiveness can be seen as unexpected and extravagant. The father who gave the younger son what he asked for, even though doing so would have hurt the father, cost him financially, and hurt the family or community relationships. The father who welcomed the younger son in a way he didn't have to: with open arms, forgiveness, joy and celebration. This very same father also went out to seek his elder son to invite him into the celebration. I can't help but love the conversation between the father and his elder son. The elder son seems to distance himself from his father's extravagant generosity and extravagant joy, and therefore distances himself from his father. Take a closer look at the words he uses: referring to his brother as "that son of yours", for instance, while the father reminds his elder son of the relationship by calling the same person "brother of yours". The father seems only to want to invite both his sons into his joy, but they each responded to the invitation differently.

Jesus didn't conclude his parable with the elder son's reaction to the father's invitation. Scholars tell us that is probably because at the time, the purpose of the parable was how Jesus responded to the Pharisees who were criticizing him for hanging around with what they thought were the wrong kind of people. The beautiful part of that is Jesus may have been using this parable as way to invite his critics into that same joy; the joy of people returning to God's love, listening and receiving the message that they are beloved children of God, and God wants to be in relationship with them and for them to live the ways of God's love. These same scholars tell us Jesus intentionally ended the parable the way he did so the Pharisees could decide for themselves if they wanted to accept the invitation to be part of the joy of God, or not.

That interpretation is most likely correct. However, if we leave it there, then there is nothing in that parable for us today, because it is not just for other people from another time. One of the beautiful things about parables, is they can have a timeless quality, and no matter who you are, where you are from, or when you live, there can be something in a parable for you.

Perhaps today we might hear something in the parable of the man who had two sons about God's Kingdom, what some call the Beloved Community. Today's parable reminds us that joy is one of the main characteristics of God's Kingdom; joy that is often characterized with extravagant feasts, music, and dancing. And what God wants more than anything, is to welcome all God's children into that joy and take away whatever barriers might keep any of God's children from entering into that joy. So much so that God has paid the price, and it was much more than a meal or a cup of coffee, - with the death and resurrection of Jesus- for all of us, for you and me, everyone, to be welcomed into and be part of God's Kingdom, right here and right now. The more we accept that invitation, the deeper we enter into God's Joy, the more we too can extend that invitation to others.

But such an extravagantly generous God might be hard for people to imagine, as pay it forward things like forgiveness, compassion, care for those who come after us, and hope are not as common as we might want them to be. That is one of the challenges we as followers of Jesus have; to show the world glimpses of what God and God's Kingdom is like: joyful, caring, different from what might be expected, and can feel like a welcome home. I'm proud of the ways we here at Church of the Good Shepherd continue to help each other show our neighbors the love God has for them in things that might look ordinary but at their heart and soul are pieces of joy: whether it's a meal, or a welcome, the TARDIS on the church steps, or a cup of coffee already paid for waiting to be enjoyed. All are expressions of the Kingdom of God inviting all people deeper into God's joy.