

B Proper 19
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RCL Psalm 116.6

Losing and Gaining

...the Lord has treated you well. Psalm 116.6

With all due modesty, I'd like to say that introverts are a great gift to the world. All of you extroverts are, too, but that is subject for another sermon another time. Today it's introverts who are on my mind, myself being chief among them. Introverts are a little bit awkward about engaging the world around them, but they're really good at turning their gaze inward, surveying the inner landscape, asking what all this means, asking what we all feel about that.

So it comes as no surprise that, as his retirement approaches, this introvert has been thinking back through the past forty years or so and evaluating what it feels like and what it means. The best summary is from today's Psalm reading: ... the Lord has treated you well. Through the confusion of discerning a call to ordained priesthood, becoming aware of the trust my mentor priest, Father Weidemann, placed in me, learning to be a priest through those early years as your rector, becoming comfortable with you as my family (God's tremendous gift), living deeper into the frailty, the pain, the joy, and the promise of human life with Jesus as Lord, coming to understand that it is now time to serve the Lord and the Lord's people in a different way – in all this, the Lord has treated me well. And I am so grateful, so eternally grateful.

Without going into sordid details, I can say that I think I am the happiest member of my immediate family. Four brothers, two fathers, two mothers, two grandmothers – I think I am the most contented with his life. The Lord has indeed treated me well. And that contentment has come because the Lord called me out of myself to serve Him and Her people. When all of this started, I really had no idea of what service meant, of the joy of being a servant (or deacon, in church language), of the power of servanthood. Father Weidemann began the teaching, and you, in concert with God's Spirit, have continued the teaching, and the joy. I have even learned the serviceability of forgiving myself when I have failed in my calling, failed God, failed you, failed myself. For all that, I am eternally grateful.

One of the greatest gifts of this pilgrimage has been the gradual learning to see, however obscurely, life as Jesus sees it. I have learned that the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel is a blueprint for living, not a puzzling ideal. Truly blessed are those that Jesus names here, because they know life as God knows it and as God leads us to live it. Though the world loudly disagrees, we God-folk know that the truly blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the right-seeking and the right-living, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, even the persecuted. We often slip back into the world's way of thinking, but God's grace is such that She recalls us to His own way of seeing, into the way of Jesus who gave His life that God might be loved, who gave His life that others might live, who gave His life that He might be

the servant-Lord of all, the God of all existence who still stoops to wash feet. I am still learning and will till I die; God is still treating me well.

Another thing I have learned is that what I treasure is what I have given away, not what I have kept for myself. Introverts value their quiet time, their time alone, and it is a labor of love to give themselves to others, to give their time, their attention, their caring. As I look back over almost forty years of ministry, the times and events that I remember and hold most dear are the times I spent with you: standing at deathbeds, praying for children, anointing the sick, celebrating marriages and baptisms, catching the “aha-moments”, trying to understand what God is doing with us. The quiet times are necessary battery-charging for an introvert, but it is the giving away that is memorable and comforting.

I’ve even learned the joy, not the duty, but the joy of giving money away. Though I never lacked for food and clothing when I was growing up, my Depression-era parents taught their sons that the more money you had the better off you were. And to a certain extent, that’s true. But that philosophy has its limits, and the limits come fairly quickly. I had to unlearn the habit of holding everything to myself. I had to learn the pleasure of giving to my church, that God’s good news of life and love for all could be taught and lived; I had to learn that I enjoyed giving to the soup kitchen, as I watched God’s treasured ones have full stomachs at least one night a week; I had to learn that museums and orchestras and choruses and schools made me richer the more I supported them. It was stewardship at its best, though I was a slow learner. The Lord taught me to open my tightly clenched fist and hold everything lightly, for He would provide. The Lord is treating me well.

I sometimes break into a cold sweat when I realize how I might have lived my life and missed the prize, how I might have gained the world but lost my soul. I don’t by any means think the Lord is finished with me, but at least the path, the way, the direction is well-set. I *have* learned that the upside-down world of the Lord’s Beatitudes is reality. I *have* learned that the most important part of my life is what I have away, not what I keep. I *have* learned that belonging to others and giving myself to them is more rewarding than clutching scraps to myself.

The Lord is not finished with me yet. But the Lord has indeed treated me well. Amen.