

Sharing the Blessing
Luke 6:27-38

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I want to take you to Fayetteville, Arkansas, the home of the University of Arkansas and the Razorbacks. Over forty years ago a young man named Fadil Bayyari moved to Fayetteville. Fadil was a Palestinian Muslim from the West Bank in Israel and he immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. In today's parlance we would call him a *dreamer*.

When he arrived in the states those many years ago he was 19 and had \$350 dollars in his pocket. Today he's one of Fayetteville's most successful builders, a father and grandfather. And because of the kind of person he is he has found astounding ways to give back to his community.

A Fayetteville park and elementary school are named for him because he donated the land for each. He and his family recently gave \$1 million dollars toward the construction of the new Children's Northwest hospital in Springdale.

What is even more remarkable, Fadil, a Muslim, helped the local Jewish community build a synagogue – Temple Shalom. When he discovered that their small Jewish community was having difficulty finding a home for their new synagogue he contacted them and told them he wanted to help. He did – at no charge – and the synagogue opened in 2009. Fadil has also donated his services to several Christian churches.

When he was interviewed and asked about his generosity this is what he said: “Northwest Arkansas has given me the opportunity to grow and invest my time and talent, and I can never forget that. My utmost gratefulness propels me to give back to this community.” (*The Rotarian*, My 2018, 11)

Imagine that courageous nineteen year old walking into a new life with nothing more than hope in a dream. And imagine the way that the blessing he received became a blessing he passed on. We call that the *law of reciprocity*, the circle of receiving and giving of blessing.

Fadil was born in a place not far from where Jesus lived and the Koran that Fadil reads holds stories of Jesus, who in Islam is considered a prophet. And so it is not difficult to hear Middle Eastern wisdom punctuating the story of Fadil's sojourn to Arkansas. The *law of reciprocity* is found in the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you – a good measure running over placed into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”(Luke 6:37-38)

Being a Christian is more than believing in Jesus; it is actually following Jesus, walking in the way he walked, making a life out of the wisdom he taught. Being a Christian, in this case, is entering with full-hearted trust into the mystery of the *law of reciprocity*, the circle of giving and receiving, of blessing and being blessed. That's where the joy and peace lives. That's where you have to go to find them.

Fadil actually exemplifies that truth. And in this case a practicing Muslim, one who lives in that Middle-Eastern *law of reciprocity*, can actually serve as an example for those of us who would like to be better Christians, who would like to not only believe in Jesus but actually follow him.

I have just returned from a spiritual pilgrimage to Chiapas, Mexico. Chiapas is the “third Mexico,” the most southerly region that has been isolated and very poor, a region that leans toward Central America as it shares a border with Guatemala.

I spent my time in a small town called San Cristobal de las Casas at the Ecumenical Intercultural Center there. Our Disciples have a mission staff person who serves there, Elena Huegel. The mission of the center is to serve as a bridge of reconciliation, healing and hope for Christians of all kinds – Protestants, Catholics and the indigenous communities. Like many other places Latin America Chiapas has troubled colonial past that included the oppression of the indigenous by the rich and powerful.

In the 1960s a new bishop arrived and stayed for forty years, a man by the name of Samuel Ruiz. He had no intention of becoming a reformer. But sometimes history and the Spirit makes us so whether we want to or not.

If you are familiar with the late Bishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, Don Samuel lived at the same time. The difference between the two is that Chiapas was not in full blown civil war so Bishop Samuel escaped the fate of Romero – assassination by the government death squads that opposed reform.

In the aftermath of the 2nd Vatican Council which he attended, in a context where 75% of the church were poor indigenous persons, Bishop Samuel had, in his own words, “a conversion.” He was converted by the Spirit to become a church for the whole people, not just the rich and powerful. And over the years he served in Chiapas that is exactly what happened. He became a facilitator of dialogue, reconciliation, justice, the dignity of all people and peace-making.

Bishop Samuel advocated for the indigenous communities and taught the church to walk in the way of Jesus, to pursue peace, justice and dignity for all people. This included self-determination and freedom from persecution and discrimination. The indigenous would reclaim their Mayan cultural practices which had been forbidden under colonial rule. Reform required addressing the reclaiming of ancestral lands seized in the time of the Spanish conquest.

When David Vargas was acting as our Global Ministries Latin American regional director, he made regular visits to Mexico and would often stop in and meet with Bishop Samuel. David was always inspired by his sense of God’s reign being fulfilled in history and the church’s call to be part of building it.

Bishop Samuel’s place in Chiapas became so central that during the Zapatista (EZLN) uprising and rebellion of 1994 he became one of the chief mediators seeking a peace solution.

Bishop Samuel was interviewed late in his life and he shared these powerful words:

“The way Jesus understood society and founded his Church calls into question the exercise of power as a form of domination. We learn from Jesus that in the society of his time some people were using the power entrusted to them to dominate other people rather than to serve them. Jesus criticized their practice and the way he contemplated and exercised power was different ... he used his power in the service of the Reign of God – for service and not for domination.”(*Seeking Freedom: Bishop Samuel Ruiz*, p. 42)

Listen again to the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount and let’s see if we can hear yet another dimension:

“Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you – a good measure running over placed into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”(Luke 6:37-38)

The *law of reciprocity* – the mystery of giving and receiving – is joining by another one: power is not to be used to dominate others but rather to serve them. Our relationships of giving and receiving are called to be mutual. Neighbor love means living together with shared love to join in the work of building the Reign of God.

In this sense, in the wisdom of Jesus, we find Fadil of Arkansas and Samuel of Chiapas providing meat on those spiritual bones; the joy and peace of life is found in giving and receiving, entering into the mystery of reciprocity, and way we give and receive through mutuality, free of domination, full of love and justice.

Remember: The way to the kingdom is not primarily by saying “I love Jesus.” The way to the kingdom is by following Jesus.

So this leaves questions for you and me:

“How willing am I to do that? Am I willing to allow my actual commitment to rise to the level of my ideals? Am I willing to act out my faith in this actual historic moment?”

When it comes to the church, the church in Chiapas or the church in Missouri, the true test is not whether we say we love Jesus, however important that is. You can say or sing “I love Jesus” a million times but if we don’t do the things Jesus said, if we don’t walk the walk, then we are not Jesus people.

The *law of reciprocity*, the mystery of giving and receiving, gives legs to a heart-felt faith and escorts us into the house of joy. That demands mutuality – non-domination – in the way we give and receive, through love and justice.

That is the high call to the church of Jesus Christ, the kind of church we are and are becoming, the kind of church that is blessed and blessing, non-judgmental, non-condemning, forgiving, justice-seeking, generous, ever seeking God’s Reign in the world, and joining in that party wherever we find it.

That’s a church worth being a part of. That’s a church that is a part of God’s intention for the world. It’s who we are at our best. And with God’s grace in the fullness of time we will become more so.