

“The Art of Recreating”

Isaiah 65:17-25

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Last Sunday, I told you about my mother’s penchant for making sure I get a Christmas gift, even if I don’t really want one, and how she painstakingly makes sure that the value of the gifts my siblings and I receive is virtually equal. She is quite adept at the art of “gifting,” a recent English-language euphemism to describe the similarly sounding practice of giving, more generically experienced as the offering of something to someone. As much as I may spurn my mother’s spiritual gift of gifting, the truth is that gift-giving is a valuable and often sacred form of social transaction and I wholeheartedly recommend to you a book which describes very well this phenomenon, a book by Lewis Hyde the title of which, “The Gift” is far less imaginative than its subtitle: “Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property,” But don’t let the subtitle scare you away. This is not a book about carnal desire, but about the desire to pass on what one has received from others, whether it be poetry, art, music, or even property. Hyde’s thesis follows on a native North American saying that “One man’s gift must not be another man’s capital,” meaning that that which is given once must be continually given if it is to honor the original giver of the gift. Put another way, what was public enough to be a gift can never become private enough to be kept for oneself. Although the term “regifting” did not enter the popular vocabulary until

the 1995 episode of the TV show Seinfeld, Lewis Hyde described way back in 1979 the less cynical variation of the practice of passing on a gift one has received.

I thought about this practice of passing on what we have received, of “regifting,” upon reading our passage tonight from Isaiah 65. Among these nine verses are some of the most beautiful and memorable images in Scripture, of the shalom of God actually lived by God’s people, and indeed all of God’s creation, of people living in health and abundance, of young and old alike experiencing everything God has in mind for human life as God intended it. Just about the only thing different from this vision of the human community from that found in the Garden of Eden is that people actually do die, although at the ripe old ages God had in mind for the bodies we were given. The vision of this human community may be localized in Jerusalem, but it is certainly a metaphor for all of creation, for surely God is capable of bring to fruition this same shalom not just on one mountaintop in the Middle East, but wherever and whenever God may so choose. The particularity of this vision for a chosen people recently returned from exile should not keep us from imagining it for all people anywhere and everywhere.

But as magnificent as that vision is throughout those nine wonderful verses, what caught my attention was the first verse, the one which says, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.” “I am about to create.” It is an interesting fact of the Old Testament that the Hebrew word used here for “create” never appears unless its subject is God. Only God creates. Human beings may make things, fashion

things, construct things, and destroy things, but only God creates. This word for the creative process is not linked only with substances and materials, such as the world or we human beings, but also more abstract things like the conscience, as when the Psalmist pleads, “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” and “darkness” and “woe.” This is the same word used at the beginning “When God created the heavens and the earth,” and so what God is proclaiming through the prophet Isaiah now is on the same order as that first creation, that it is not something in which human beings are subjects, but rather objects. We may like to think that we are the masters of our own domain, the captains of our own destiny, but there are some realms in which we really have no power or authority, and creation is one of those realms. Only God creates.

Learning this about God caused me to rethink a little bit about myself. You see, I like to think of myself as a creative person. Even though I dropped out of architecture school, architecture was a creative endeavor. Even though I never made a film after finishing college with a degree in filmmaking, that too was a creative endeavor. I feel creative, even if I am not always successful. I try to cultivate my creative tendencies even if I can't devote as much time to it as I'd like. If I had to identify perhaps my one spiritual gift from God, I would say it is creativity, even if it does not get expressed in traditional art forms. And yet, only God creates. The rest of us just make things, fashion things, construct things, destroy things, or taking a cue from Lewis Hyde and Jerry Seinfeld, re-create things. Only God creates. My job then,

is to practice re-creation, not, unfortunately, simply recreation. Wouldn't it be nice if all any of us had to do was fly a kite or go for a swim or play a little golf? But we are not there yet.

Now, it may be true that the vision in the 65th chapter of Isaiah has not yet come to pass, at least not anywhere near Jerusalem, but that does not mean that God has not created it. That first verse may say that God is "about to" create new heavens and a new earth, and so we may think it is yet to come, but the idea of that creation, its potential, its power is just as important as the thing itself, in much the same way that art or music are evocative and valuable and powerful representations of the things which inspired them. What an artist depicts or a musician composes may not really exist except in his or her imagination, except in the depths of their souls and longings, but the product of their labors moves us and shapes us as we interact with it. So it is too with God's vision; it may be about to happen, but the fact that it is God's promise makes it for us as good as created. The difference is, of course, that artists and musicians, and you and I in all we do, are taking the raw materials of our souls and imaginations and re-creating, re-gifting so to speak, what we have received from God and others. God doesn't need our inspiration, but we need God's and the world needs God's.

Lewis Hyde, the guy who wrote the book "The Gift," talks about the need for a gift to continue moving, and not to be placed on one's mantel like a trophy, or consumed alone in one's dining room, or turned into a means of production to

survive, but to keep moving if it is to remain alive, and if the recipient is to remain alive. He describes tales from culture after culture in which the person who hoards a gift or who stops the chain of gifting, meets with a dire end, while the person who regifts is blessed. Culturally speaking, it is not unlike the email chain letters you may receive from time to time promising blessing and threatening disaster if the thing is not forwarded to X number of people within X number of minutes. I guess I am naïve enough to think there is a fundamental difference between the circulation of authentically given gifts and an internet chain letter and so I do not pass the latter on, though I suppose one day I may come to regret it like the main character in one of the Grimm brother's folk tales which Hyde uses to illustrate the idea of gift circulation: the "Tale of the Ungrateful Son" goes something like this: "A man and his wife were once sitting by the door of their house, and they had a roasted chicken set before them, and were about to eat it together. Then the man saw that his aged father was coming, and hastily took the chicken and hid it, for he would not permit him to have any of it. The old man came, took a drink, and went away. Now the son wanted to put the roasted chicken on the table again, but when he took it up, it had become a great toad, which jumped into his face and sat there and never went away again, and if any one wanted to take it off, it looked venomously at him as if it would jump in his face, so that no one would venture to touch it. And the ungrateful son was forced to feed the toad every day, or else it fed itself on his face; and thus he went about the world without knowing rest."

Into what would God's vision have been transformed if Isaiah had not regifted it to his people, his community? Into what will God's vision be transformed if we do not regift it to our community, our world? I daresay it will be worse than a toad threatening to eat our faces! Indeed, look around and see what it has become when we have even slowed down the circulation of God's precious gift. In the days of slavery in the United States, God's gift of this vision came to a grinding halt, becoming the property of white Christians who saw in the newly conquered territory of North America the new Jerusalem only for themselves, a place of peace and prosperity right now, but who projected it for their African slaves a long ways into the future, and made sure they knew it. The image of the wolf and the lamb feeding together, of people who build their own houses and live in them, became a spiritual pacifier. "You will receive your reward in the next life," the logic went, "so don't complain so much in this life." Instead of regifting God's wonderful vision, in their ignorance and greed, those with the power to do so hid it away like the ungrateful son's roast chicken, and the United States of America still has a big social toad squatting on its face, an ongoing racial tension seen most recently in the events in Jena, Alabama. We may thank God that the gift of the vision has not completely stopped circulating, as we've come a long way since the days of slavery, but we can see the consequences of even slowing it down.

It is, of course, not fear of the consequences of not circulating the gift that should motivate us, but rather the joy of passing it on. Recall these words from

tonight's lesson in Isaiah: "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." If God's spirit and vision have any power in our lives, if they bring any joy into our lives, if we consider them gifts and not something we've earned or created – and heaven knows they are not – how can we do anything but dedicate ourselves to circulating those gifts, regifting them, re-creating God's creation? When God speaks of creating Jerusalem's people "as a delight," I do not believe they are only for God's delight, but for the delight of the world. You see God has given us as a gift to the world and we are called to gift ourselves by recreating God's creation, the vision set before us by Isaiah. I generally prefer not to use Jesus as a punch line to Old Testament texts, but if you need a more New Testament model, look no further than our savior who gave the gift of his own life, a gift which now lives in each one of us, a gift we are called to circulate, to regift, to re-create. When we remember that only God creates, we can begin to re-create. Let us joyfully re-create the vision given to Isaiah by living it fully, as partially and provisionally as that may be, knowing that the fullness of God's re-creation is still to come. Let us joyfully re-create it by passing on the hope of the vision by showing people glimpses of it, even if we won't see it fully in our lifetimes. Let us be the musicians and artists of that vision, re-creating in ourselves and the world what God has created in us. Amen.