

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2018; Non-lectionary sermon

Psalm 67; John 14:15-31

“I do not give to you as the world gives.”

John 14:27

Whatever happened to the simple cup of coffee? You know, the humble cup o’ joe?

The java joints of yesteryear with their white porcelain mugs are vanishing. Now, the person who hands you your cup is a barista — and you’ve got a lot of choices to make. Regular or espresso, latte or macchiato, mocha or cappuchino: the list goes on.

Once you make up your mind, you’ve got to settle on the size of your cup: and you know, they don’t make it easy. “Small, medium or large” would be easy. Instead, for no apparent reason, it’s tall, venti or grande.

But here’s a coffee you won’t find in those barista joints. It’s called caffè sospeso.

Like the hipster coffee jargon, it’s Italian. But it’s not some new concoction of ground, infused coffee beans and dairy products — steamed, stirred or otherwise blended. Caffè sospeso is translated “suspended coffee.”

The term comes from the city of Napoli (or Naples) — which, I understand, is known as the coffee capital of Italy. Those Neapolitans do love their coffee: so

much so, they've developed a coffee-based social welfare system. And that's where suspended coffee comes in.

Here's how it works. You go down to your favorite coffee shop, you place your order, and as you get ready to pay, you ask the barista to add a suspended coffee to your bill. You're not going to end up with another cup in your hand: because suspended coffee, by definition, is for somebody else. The barista takes your money and records your suspended coffee in a ledger book, or maybe on a little chalkboard on the wall.

Later that day, or maybe the next, a complete stranger walks into the shop and asks, "Do you have any suspended coffee today?" If you, the donor, have been there already and have bought one, the barista will say "Certainly," and start pouring the person a cup.

Your cup. The one you bought. But it's perfectly all right, because that's what's supposed to happen. In Napoli, a suspended coffee is a free gift to the universe — or, rather, to some hard-luck stranger who doesn't have two euros to rub together. It's a "pay it forward" thing. A random act of kindness.

I don't know about you, but I like the idea. It's pure altruism. The giver doesn't know the recipient, but instead takes quiet joy in knowing someone else is benefitting from his or her generous impulse.

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

I like it also because that sort of giving is rare. Wherever in this world it appears, it's a beautiful thing to behold.

Not that there aren't other kinds of giving in this world. It's just that so many other gifts are complicated, in one way or another.

Jesus tells his disciples, in John 14, that he's about to give them something. He's going to give them the gift of peace. But it's not going to be like any other gift. "I do not give to you as the world gives." What does he mean by that?

Well, let's start by looking at some of the ways the world gives.

The first — and this is very common — is *the grudging gift*. You know how that goes. The phone rings. You pick it up. There's a perky voice on the other end of the line: something about the annual appeal on behalf of your college, or some charity you support that's in dire straits unless people like you step up and make another gift.

Now, maybe that call doesn't come at a good time for you. Maybe money's tight. But you don't want to be a deadbeat, so you say: "Just put me down for whatever I gave last year." You may not be happy saying it, but you go ahead anyway. It's an obligation. And that, my friends, is the grudging gift.

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

Another popular variety is the gift that expects something in return (known in legal circles as the *quid pro quo*). Literally it means “something for something” or “this for that.” There are many forms of this ever-popular gift. There’s the fundraiser for public radio that promises you a tote bag — or maybe an umbrella if you’re a high roller. There’s the charity auction, from which you come home with a prize donated by some local business. There’s the sidewalk paver sale that displays your name for posterity, outside a public building. Or, the glossy annual report of a college or hospital that looks like a magazine, but is really just a list of donors’ names. The names are ranked according to the magnitude of the gift — supporters, patrons, benefactors, leadership circle, people-before-whom-the-development-director-will-kneel-to-kiss-their-ring, that sort of thing.

Just as a sidebar, it’s getting harder for the church to compete against this sort of give-to-get-something-back charitable appeal: because we don’t traditionally do that. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches how, in performing an act of generosity, we ought not to let our right hand know what our left hand is doing. (That, by the way, is where that expression comes from — although most people, when they use it today, are talking about clueless confusion rather than deliberate discretion and modesty in giving.) Jesus’ homespun advice about the left

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

hand not knowing what the right is doing doesn't exactly fit the glossy annual report of donors (nor, God knows, the college field house named after the millionaire captain of industry), but there are some people who prefer that sort of thing. Often, the attractiveness of the *quid pro quo means* that means gifts that, in an earlier generation, might have gone to the church are going somewhere else instead.

Finally, another way the world likes to give is *with strings attached*. We've all heard of the college scholarship that can rarely be given out because it's designated for a student who comes from one particular county, plays on the tennis team and has at least a certain grade-point average.

Election Day's this week, and all those TV ads we've been seeing are funded by political campaign contributions. We all know how they work! Are those contributions — especially the larger ones — really offered altruistically for the good of the larger community? Or, are they more of a calculated investment, intended to purchase for the donor access to the lawmaking process? Now, there's a gift that keeps on giving!

The donor may hand over the check, but never entirely lets go of it.

These are just some of the ways the world commonly gives.

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

Jesus said, “I do not give to you as the world gives.” As, indeed, he did not. His disciples scarcely understood it at the time, but when he took the bread and broke it, saying “This is my body,” and elevated the cup, saying, “This is the new covenant in my blood,” our Lord was laying down a trail of theological bread crumbs, extending from the cross clear back to the Upper Room. No, they didn’t understand it at the time, but they would very soon. After he had breathed his last, they would come to understand what manner of man he was, and the supremely generous gift he had offered up.

Now, let’s look at the other side of the ledger and examine how you and I are meant to give, as Christians: “not as the world gives,” but as our Lord gives.

First, we’re supposed to give not grudgingly, but joyfully — with an open heart. “God loves a cheerful giver,” say the scriptures (1 Corinthians 9:7). I’ve known some cheerful givers in my time, and I’ll tell you, they’re wonderful people! They’re also very happy people. That’s because they’ve mastered a fundamental truth of Christian faith — and, indeed, of life itself — that the actions that bring us the greatest joy are often those closely associated with substantial, even sacrificial giving.

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

Second, you and I are meant to leave behind that worldly sort of giving that's always looking to get something back in return. Jesus didn't say, "This is my body, given for you — and thanks for the tote bag!" We Christians are meant to give with open hands, as open as our Lord's as he offers the bread and the cup. As open as his hands nailed to the cross.

Third, when Christians give, we do so not just with open heart and open hands, but also with open eyes: eyes eager to see what wonders the Holy Spirit will work with the gift we've just released. Yes, there is such a thing as designated giving, and it's an important part of the support of the church. Yet let's never tie things down so tightly that we fail to give the Spirit room to work. Christian giving is less like controlling a kite with its tethering string, and more like releasing a dove to soar upwards into the heavens, buoyed up on the winds of the Spirit.

Next Sunday, Consecration Sunday, we're going to do what we so often do, this time of year. We're going to submit our estimates of giving — our pledge cards — for the coming year. We're going to do it right here in the worship service: hoping to get it over with all in one day (or nearly so) — then to gather for lunch together, while we wait for the announcement of how well we all did.

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

We're going to celebrate the need of the giver to give: not so much the need of the church to receive. Such giving is a deeply Christian impulse: one that's so very different from so many of the ways the world chooses to give. We're also going to celebrate proportionate giving: a conscious decision to base our giving on a percentage of our income, using the biblical ideal of the tithe as our ideal.

Won't you think about those things in the days to come — so that next Sunday, you'll be prepared to give not as the world gives?

And what *is* this gift, here in John 14, that Jesus declares he is giving “not as the world gives?” I've already told you: it's the gift of peace: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” Not just any peace, not the sort of low-grade peace we imagine we're looking for, when we say “I'd like some peace and quiet, please.”

So often, what we mean by “peace” is more like taking a coffee break from life: stepping away from that crying, colicky baby, or going a whole day without that micro-managing boss dropping by to look over our shoulder.

Jesus' ideal of peace — his *gift* of peace, that he offers, free and clear — isn't like that. It's not defined negatively: as the absence of something that's

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

nagging or annoying or fearsome. No, Jesus' ideal of peace is the Hebrew *shalom*: that rich word depicting a deep and abiding sense of well-being — a talent for resting in the Lord, come what may, as a child rests content in the embrace of a loving parent.

It's the gift that comes to us, in a mysterious way, as we take this bread and this cup and pass them from one to another, serving others before we serve ourselves. It's the gift we smell and taste and feel, as we take that simple nourishment into our bodies, following the example of numberless generations before us. We trust, as we do so, that God's love will continue to nourish us, even though all human sources of support may one day fail.

Christ gives to us not as the world gives: so let not our hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid!

Let us pray:

**Lord,
In bread broken, in wine poured out,
in blood shed, in flesh that is all too frail —
even amidst fearsome trials,
we ride the surging waters
of abiding generosity,
of victorious love that never lets us go.
Yours is the generosity, O God,
yours the love.**

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES

**You are the first giver,
and we the mere imitators.
These gifts you give
come from resources you have loaned us for but a little while,
calling us to steward them and share them,
inviting us to partake of them, yes,
but also to give them away to others:
such gifts will never run out.
We thank you that you do not give as the world gives,
and that this is the one thing in all the grasping universe
that saves us. Amen.**

Copyright © 2018 by Carlos E. Wilton. All rights reserved.