

If You Give Jesus a Muffin – Tyler Merrill

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

(Opened with a reading of If You Give a Moose a Muffin by Laura Numeroff)

Alright, for all you kids here today, I'm going to let you in on a little secret, which is that I know who the moose in this story is. Do you want to know who it is? It's you! Do you know how I know? I'll tell you. In a couple hours, when I finish talking, we're going to say some prayers and greet one another, and then we're going to have some bread. Rick and I are going to break it in half, steam is going to rise up to the ceiling (because Elise just pulled it out of the oven), and then every one of you is going to come up here and get a nice piece of it.

But what I've realized is that if you have one piece of this bread, you're going to want another. So as soon as the service is over you're going to run up here and get a big handful. And that'll start to make you thirsty, so a few of you are going to ask me for a cup of grape juice. And after you've chugged through all your grape juice and demolished the bread, you're still going to want some more. So you'll run downstairs for potluck! Sounds like the moose, doesn't it?! Yeah, that's the secret—you're the moose! Except it's not really a secret anymore, everybody knows, so now it's good news.

By the way, in church we have a word for good news: it's "gospel."

Now our rich friend in the gospel story, or the story about good news, is finding out that Jesus is a lot like the moose too. Except...it doesn't really seem like good news to the rich man, does it? Just like a moose is going to want some jam if you give him a muffin, if you tell Jesus that you've kept the Ten Commandments since your youth, he's going to want you to do something else—like give all your money to the poor. By the way, isn't it funny that Jesus says to the man, *You lack one thing*, as if that was the last thing Jesus was going to ask him to do?! We know it won't be the last thing because Jesus says, at the end, after you do all that, *come follow me*.

Which is exactly what my dad always use to say to me on family chore day, "Alright, Tyler, I want you to take this rag and this spray, and wipe down every piece of wooden furniture in the living room, and then come right back." I hated that! "Come right back." Because I knew it meant that I was going to be asked to do another chore in just a few minutes. And just like the man in the story, I would go away grieving.

Which reminds me of another secret about the moose story (and I already told a secret to the kids, so this one is for everybody else): the secret is that this is not really a story for children, it's a story for us! How do I know? Because I go to the Simple Room, and I know that if I give a kid a snack, she's going to want to play ping pong, and when we're done playing ping pong, she's going to want to do some painting, and then play dodgeball, and then carpet ball, and then get on the computer, and at some point her wanting to do all these things with me is not going to be so cute and fun... and when that happens I'll start [said with exhaustion] playing ping pong, and getting snack ready, and refereeing dodgeball games. And that mindset is so hard to break out of.

Thomas Aquinas defines sloth as “resistance to the demands of love”—which is what I’ll start doing if you keep asking me to do things. I wonder what the opposite of resisting the demands of love would be? Accepting them, welcoming them, **celebrating them**. That’s how I know that this story is really a story for me. I need to sit down with a kid, open up this book, and remember how to laugh at and celebrate how ridiculous and fun it is to put on puppet shows, to get out all the paints and make a big mess! Life is a lot more full with kids isn’t it? No wonder Jesus said, *Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.*

But welcoming Jesus is difficult—like it’s difficult to fit a camel through the eye of a needle. And it’s so difficult because, just like a child, he always wants another piece of me. If the rich young ruler had given all his goods to the poor and come to follow Jesus, pretty soon Jesus would have asked him to do something else outrageous—like feed four thousand people! And when he was done with that, Jesus would ask him to feed five thousand people! Then Jesus would send him off with nothing but sandals, a staff, and a friend to travel far from home, to live under other people’s roofs, and to spend all his days with crowds of sick, crazy, smelly people. And if our rich friend did all that, and had not yet gone home grieving, he eventually would have, when Jesus got arrested and crucified. Everybody else did.

By the way, I wonder if that had something to do with why Jesus exclaimed from the cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* I don’t know if God had really forsaken Jesus that day, I tend to doubt it. But all of his friends certainly did.

Same thing with Job. Earlier on in the story, he cried, *I am a laughingstock to my friends.* And the psalmist writes, *I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads.*

I wonder how often the Jews asked God why he had forsaken them during the Holocaust.

At one of the camps, three Jewish rabbis who before the war had been heads of academies, who all had the Talmud memorized by heart, decided, like Job, to put God on trial. After days of arguing back and forth, the verdict came in: God was guilty. After that announcement, the judge simply said, “Now let’s go to prayer.”

Elie Wiesel was asked, 30 years after his experience in the Nazi concentration camps, if after all that time he had come to any more clarity about the whole situation. He said, “No.” In fact, the more he read all the documents that came out after the war, the less he understood—because this event, which he described as the greatest in history, actually could have been avoided. “One gesture by one nation, one statement by one leader in the 30’s, one move by France, one outcry by Roosevelt, one movement of finger of displeasure, of blame, and millions of Jews would have been spared.”

I struggled believing him when I heard that, until I learned about the Évian Conference, which was held in France in response to the thousands of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, just a year before the Germans began systematically killing them. Representatives from 32 countries came, and the hopes of the Jews were raised. As an American leader acknowledged, 40 years later, “If

each nation at Évian had agreed on that day to take in 17,000 Jews at once, every Jew in the Reich could have been saved.”

Even Hitler had said, “I can only hope and expect that the other world, which has such deep sympathy for these criminals [Jews], will at least be generous enough to convert this sympathy into practical aid. We, on our part, are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries, for all I care, even on luxury ships.”

But the practical aid never accumulated. The U.S. and Britain, both seen as leaders at the conference, refused to take in more refugees, and the rest of the nations followed suit.

Can you even imagine if things had gone differently? If each nation had taken in a share of the refugees and Hitler put them all on luxury ships and sent them off? I’ll bet the Jews would have felt a whole lot less forsaken by God. In fact, they’d probably think God outdid the miracle of the Exodus! Not only did God get Pharaoh to let his people go, but God got Pharaoh to send them off on vacation cruises!

But nobody wanted to take in all those refugees. Why? Because taking in refugees is like giving a moose a muffin! The demands of love are innumerable. To welcome refugees, some of us might eventually have to start doing outrageous things, like selling our goods and giving them money, or sharing our space and food with them, or teaching them how to speak a new language, driving them everywhere they need to go—everything you’d need to do for a child!

Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me. Why is it that the kind of people Jesus wants us to welcome are those who are probably going to demand the most of us?—orphans, widows, foreigners, strangers, prisoners, the poor, the sick... Because other people are not welcoming them! And pretty soon they will start feeling like they are worms, and *not human; scorned by others, despised by the people,* and they will cry out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

They’ll be like my friend Andrea, who is African American. On the way back from Ferguson last year she burst out into tears, saying, “There’s all this attention being given to this one black kid who was killed by a white police officer. Why? Is it because the officer is white? Because where I’m from in Chicago black people are being killed by black people every day, and nobody pays any attention! Nobody cares! It makes me feel like my life doesn’t matter.”

You know, I’ll bet that sign on our front yard makes Andrea feel a little bit different about her life. She probably feels a whole lot less forsaken by God and everyone else—which is why the sign says specifically, “Black Lives Matter.” It’s also why Jesus said that in the kingdom of heaven, the *first will be last and the last will be first.* Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Everybody will be first.” If he said that, we’d probably need to take down that sign and put up one that says something more like, “All Lives Matter.”

So what does this mean for most of us, who are first? Jesus said, *Anyone [who] wants to be first must be the very last, and servant of all.*

I love the story about how those “Black Lives Matter” signs began to be printed. Last year, majority black neighborhoods all around St. Louis, started putting up signs that said, “We Must Stop Killing Each Other.” Why? In 2012, 247 African Americans were murdered in Missouri. This year already, in St. Louis alone, 141 African Americans have been murdered—that’s a life taken every other day! And over 90% of the time, they are taken by other African Americans. So when the nearby majority white communities started seeing “We Must Stop Killing Each Other” signs, they started asking their black neighbors what they could do to support them, to serve them. And their neighbors told them, “Put up signs in your yards that say, ‘Black Lives Matter.’”

To become *the very last*, to become a servant, is to become like this kid; it is like asking your neighbor who is suffering, “What can I do to support you?” And be warned, if you put up a sign in your yard that says “Black Lives Matter,” it won’t be long before Jesus asks you to do something else.

But instead of getting all put off by this, and going home grieving like our rich friend, let us strive to receive these opportunities the same way this child welcomes a moose, or the way our children celebrate this bread. For our suffering neighbors are the gifts of God, for the people of God. And we’ve been taught how to receive them: saying, “Thanks be to God.”