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Mark 9:36-37. Revised Standard Version.

³⁶ And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

The Dangers of Herbivores.

Starting in seventh grade, I picked citrus with Mexican migrant workers. I would ride my bike to the shacks that Sunkist provided for them, getting there not long after dawn. The migrant workers from Mexico were paid very little and sent most of what they earned back to their families in Mexico. Some of them were supporting grandchildren. Each morning, as the sun was rising, we would climb into the back of canvas covered trucks. We would sit facing each other along two benches that ran down the sides of each truck. Now, at the beginning of the picking season, each of us was issued a large canvas sack with a shoulder strap, a pair of clippers, and two pairs of long leather gloves. The gloves were very important; the boys picked mostly lemons because the ladders were shorter than the ladders used with orange trees - but the lemon trees had sharp thorns. The trees evolved with long thorns to protect them from herbivores. One morning, as I was riding out in a truck, I opened my canvas bag and realized that I had grabbed two left gloves. That meant that I had no glove for my right

hand, my clipping hand. The thorns would shred my hand and forearm. I was panic-stricken, horrified. I'll get back to this story.

I'd like to look at an upbeat Psalm, but then talk about the other side of this Psalm. Psalms is my favorite Old Testament book; they're poetic, and even though they are ancient, they are elegant and highly readable. They tend to emit raw emotions like pain and joy. Psalm 126 was written sometime - perhaps a long time - after the Israelites returned to the land of Israel after their forced exile by the Babylonians. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians, and the Persians then allowed the Israelites to return home. Here are verses 1 to 6:

- ¹ *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.*
- ² *Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."*
- ³ *The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*
- ⁴ *Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.*
- ⁵ *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.*
- ⁶ *Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

This tells us of the joy felt by God's people when they are lifted up and out of oppression. This is a Psalm of Ascent, one of a handful of Psalms that were offered by

thankful Jews as they made religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem. They would sing them as they ascended the hillside that leads up to Jerusalem. Because this Psalm refers to reaping and sowing, Christians often use it at Thanksgiving time.

But what motivated Psalm 126? Obviously, the Israelites were offering thanks for regaining their land, including Jerusalem, their holy city. But there is a deeper context, one that talks of obligations to God. Why did God arrange for the Israelites to go back home to their holy city, and rebuild their Temple? It has to do with what we call the Old Covenant, the agreement between God and the Israelites. In Bible language, we call it a covenant, but the Old Testament authors, in the way they describe this covenant, were probably influenced by something called a suzerain contract. This was a concept in wide use during the time and in the place where much of the Old Testament was written. This is a contract where the two parties are far from equal: one of the two, the suzerain, wields all the power. The suzerain sets up the conditions of the contract, and both sides must follow the contract. Often the suzerain was a king or a powerful invader, and the second party were the people of an area that had been conquered or absorbed. The Roman Empire set up suzerain contracts with the nations it absorbed: Rome would protect the local people from their traditional enemies, but they had to strictly follow Roman law and pay heavy taxes. In the Old Testament covenant, God was of course the suzerain. But as with any good contract, the two parties received something of arguably equal value. Here is

how God engineered his suzerain contract with the Israelites. God promised to provide three things: land, progeny (or descendants), and God's blessing. In return, the Israelites had to live according to certain rules of morality, which consisted of a complex system of laws. In the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon is presented as a punishment for the Israelites not honoring their side of their covenant with God the suzerain. Their crime consisted of practicing idolatry. This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, God using the armies of enemies of the Israelites to punish them when they didn't follow their side of their covenant with God. But the people had eventually turned back to God – and they thus earned God's favor. So, God used another army to enable them to return to Jerusalem.

But here is the other side of the contract, the other side of this glorious Psalm of Ascent. The Israelites, and later the Jews, had to do certain things to get God's protection. That's how the Old Covenant worked. The daily lives of the Israelites were strictly controlled by laws laid out in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. One part of this involved making mandatory donations for at least three different purposes.

The first is called the Sacred Tythe, as described in Numbers 18:24:

²⁴ For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance.

The second is called the Feasts Tythe, as described in Deuteronomy 14:22:

²² “You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year.

The third is the Tythe of the Poor, as described in Deuteronomy 14: 28-29:

²⁸ “At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. ²⁹ And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

But we don't live under the suzerain contract of the Old Testament. We do have a covenant with God, however. God is still the suzerain for sure, but we don't have a huge, complex system of laws. The biggest requirement of our covenant by far is that we have faith in God. As a result, the New Covenant is sometimes called the Covenant of Grace, and it says that we earn God's favor simply by having faith. The gifts of the New Covenant thus come freely and do not have to be earned, like the gifts and the protections of the Old Covenant. God is still in control, but we don't have to work to earn God's forgiveness, spiritual regeneration, and salvation.

Consider a story from the Gospel of Mark that comes at the end of a passage where Jesus' disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest. This was common among Mediterranean men in ancient times; they competed to be the most honored. In this story, Jesus wants to teach them about humility, because that is one of the things Jesus asks of us - to be humble. Significantly, in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, children were held in low regard and were expected to be obedient and to be highly dependent on adults. They didn't have the freedom that children in our

society have today. Here is a quote from the Revised Standard Version:

³⁶ And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

Notice that the child is called “him”. Almost all translations of this story call the child “him” or “them”. But that is not what the Greek says. Here is the correct translation, and I had to find a rather obscure version of the Bible to get the correct translation. This is from the New American Version, Revised Edition: In it, the child Jesus refers to in this passage is not called “him” or “her”, but rather, “it”. This is how people of the time, such as the author of this Gospel would refer to a child.

³⁶ Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.”

The Greek word that appears in the manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark is the word αὐτὸ (auto). It means “it”, not “him” or “them”. So, in our quote from Mark, Jesus is identifying himself with the lowest members of society by showing his love for a child, for an “it”. He’s telling his disciples that they should do the same; and in fact, Jesus is telling them that whatever they do for a child or for some other lowly person, they are doing for Jesus – and ultimately for God. Remember, that in the New Covenant, God’s or Jesus’ love, his protection, like his protection of this child, is completely unearned. We do not have to follow dietary laws or donate money to the Temple.

Now, consider this passage from the 12th chapter of the Gospel of Mark:

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

These people who put in large sums of money did it because they were required to. They used it as an opportunity to look important, to appear pious. Jesus says this at the beginning of the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

⁶ "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

But the woman who gave two small pieces of copper gave from her heart, gave voluntarily, gave because she knew that God loved her without reservation or obligation.

We give in other ways than money. The United Methodist Church, along with its predecessors in the Methodist movement, have a long tradition of small churches. I love serving a small church. This is because a small church provides an environment that makes it easy to grow close to one's fellow congregants. It's a perfect setting for carrying out that mission of emulating Christ by living by the New Covenant. Because God does not ask much of us, and gives us completely unearned grace, in return, we voluntarily reflect that grace to each other. We are brothers and sisters, and that is

how we live within our faith family. We also reinforce in each other another underlying lesson of the New Covenant – to offer our grace to *all* people.

Look for opportunities to perform acts of kindness for someone who has not earned it. Maybe there is a person with whom you have had a shaky relationship at work or in the neighborhood or even in this church. Surprise that person with something simple. Do a favor for them. Or just be friendly. Try looking at life from that person's perspective. How many of us could easily name a couple of people who, if they simply displayed friendship with us or trust in us, would bring us great joy? And don't forget that you can immediately feel the joy of doing something for that other person. That's the secret blessing of the New Covenant. When we offer something unearned to someone, we feel the joy of living like Christ.

When we, as members of a small Methodist faith family, reach out and give unearned grace to other people, we're doing what Jesus did. We're carrying out the will of God's New Covenant with his people. We're also doing something that was done for me that day in the back of that truck when I realized that I had two left gloves, when I knew that my arm would be shredded by thorns. You see, across from me was an elderly man whom I had picked with several times. It was common for the older men to pick with the boys. I knew that this man sent almost all of what he earned back to Mexico to help his daughter feed his grandchildren. That was his life – to provide for children. This man reached out across the truck and took one of my left gloves. Then, finger by finger,

he turned it inside out. Then he handed it back to me. I was rescued. I now had a right glove. The man gave me a big grin. This man had found another child to serve. That man who performed the miracle of transforming a left glove into a right glove didn't have to help me. He could have just sat there silently, perhaps feeling sorry for himself because he earned so little and had almost nothing in life. But he was living a life that mirrored that of Jesus – giving unearned love and protection to a child.

Finally, we had a foreman in the field who liked to brag that he was a vegetarian. He said he did it because he didn't want to harm animals. Well, he was like those people who gave huge amounts of money so they would look pious. He was a proud herbivore, but he was always looking for honor and power. But the men I picked with took to heart Jesus' teaching that powerless people like children should be embraced. When I was picking in the orchards, all the men looked after all the boys. One day, our righteous foreman started screaming at me because I was filling the bottom of my crates with over-ripe fruit that I had picked up off the ground – something we weren't supposed to do, but I did this to keep up with the time constraints we were under to fill a certain number of crates. But when this happened, the men all climbed down their ladders and stood between the foreman and the boy, me. If you want to yell at someone, yell at a man, one of them said to the foreman.

And, as part of their contract with Sunkist, the pickers from Mexico were given a hot lunch in the orchard each day. Since I wasn't a migrant, I wasn't supposed to get any

of this food. But the men would insist that I eat. They didn't get extra food because I was there, but they shared what they had. To them, it was ridiculous for me to decline. I was a child. They were believers. I was to be cared for. That care was completely unearned on my part – as dictated by the New Covenant. It's often the people who have the least in the world, who take the least from it, these are the people who show the most grace for others. That's the New Covenant in action. That is how our God wants *all* of us to live. And don't forget, we receive an immediate, earthly joy when we offer grace to others – just like that elderly man, and the men who fed me in the field and who defended me from the foremen - they received the joy of serving me in the name of the New Covenant.