

## **“Doing Something for Nothing”**

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**Readings: Exodus 33:12-23 and Matthew 22:15-22**

Have you ever received something so unexpectedly good that it is inexplicable? It come out of left field, so unlikely that it seems that it came from out of nowhere.

This is how it felt for me one cold, December Sunday in Chicago. I had promised my friend Jill that I would meet her and a pastor at his storefront church to look at his ministry that distributed coats to the homeless. It was around Christmas and we were going to take his children to see Santa afterwards.

I had been spending a lot of time working with inner city youth and gang members in Cabrini Green. So, I felt like I was ready for anything. This trip promised to be in a neighborhood that was considered “bad.”

Boarding the Chicago Avenue bus, I realized that I should have asked for the exact address. The description was that it was a Latino storefront church on the route with “Iglesias” printed under a cross. I was to take the staircase up on the side door and the pastor’s apartment was said to be right above the church.

I passed Cabrini Green and looked at those ugly high rises. Over the river and a couple miles later, I pulled the chord and hopped out on what I was sure was lunch. Peeking my head into the sanctuary door, I saw a hundred folding chairs, a makeshift pulpit, a Wurlitzer organ and what appeared to be a full band set up.

When I began climbing the wooden steps, I wasn’t very far before I realized that there was quite a party going on in the pastor’s apartment.

“I thought it was just going to be a couple of us” I thought as I hesitated before knocking on the door.

It immediately swung open and a twenty something man proclaimed, “Come in, come in and join us!”

It was almost like the person knew me and hurried me into the dining room area that was filled with people. Plate after plate of food was put in front of me and I was told to eat.

“Where is Jill?” I asked and a couple of shrugging shoulders were their response.

“Would you like to see the pastor?” I was asked and before I could answer I was hustled into the living room where an older man in a suit sat. “This is...” my new friend paused and I filled in the blank, “Brian.”

“Brian it is so good to meet you. It is my birthday. Enjoy yourself.” Just like that he was back talking with his other friends.

As I ate at the table in the other room I began to be peppered with questions, mostly about the Bible. The food was delicious and had obviously had been prepared by expert hands. After what seemed like way too long of a time, I asked again, “Where is Jill?”

“Who is Jill?” someone asked honestly and that is when I figured it out.

I was at the wrong pastor’s house!!

“I really must go and find my friend, she is expecting me.” I said hastily.

“Do you really have to go?” they pleaded and someone was preparing me a heaping plate to take with me on my further journey.

As I exited the door, person after person wished me well and I left feeling like I had just met an entire room of angels whose hospitality toward me was their main concern. As I walked down Chicago Avenue, I was elated and thankful. I knew I would never forget the goodness that I met in that place.

Unexpected goodness is what I encountered. Those people did something for nothing. They expected nothing in return for their welcome and kindness.

That is also what Moses encountered on that mountain so many thousands of years ago. As happens many times in my readings of such texts, I get caught up in God's magnificence and miss God's graciousness.

At first blush, this text is about the Moses being shown God's backside and the glory of a God that Moses has interceded on behalf of the people of Israel. Moses asks God to be shown the ways of the divine and this is when Moses is given a glimpse of the greatness of God.

If I end with this simple reading, I would have missed something essential in this text. Even though it is apparent that Moses wants to see the greatness of his God, that is not really what God reveals. Can you guess what overwhelms Moses in the cleft of the rock, what it is that God shows Moses? It is his goodness.

Even when the people deserved punishment, and Moses wants strength, God reveals something about the divine in this revelation. God is good.

Where does that leave us then? When we know that we have a good God, a God who lavishes goodness all around us, we then have no excuse. We must lavish goodness on each other. We do not do this because others deserve our goodness, or because we want glory, we do it because we follow a good God whose example we follow in this world.

Go out and do something for nothing. Do good to others without the expectation of rewards. Give out goodness as liberally as the God whom we worship this morning. Thanks be to God.