

Beggars & Blanket Forts

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I have a worry about what technology may be doing to our children. You might have one or two of your own. But has anyone else noted that it is impossible to build a decent blanket fort with Wikipedia and an iPad?

When my brother and I were young, Mom got us a set of World Book Encyclopedias. I think they may have been intended for educational purposes. And I may or may not have plagiarized an article or two for school assignments over the years. But their sturdy bindings and perfectly uniform size made them excellent for pinning down the corners of the quilt we'd stretched from sofa to piano bench to coffee table to La-Z-Boy recliner, sometimes propping up the middle with a Wiffle bat to increase headroom. You can't wiki a blanket fort into existence. You need actual encyclopedias or other building materials of comparable heft and substance.

As I'm sure you are imagining, our creations were equally impressive in terms of structural engineering and architectural design. I can only imagine what wonders got erected in the living rooms of a young Valentina Cochran or Charles Shipp.

The impulse to create shelter comes early, and it comes to almost all of us. Children will build shelters even within the shelter of a home. This is practice, I suppose, for life in the world outside, where the stakes are higher and protection from the elements will consume a lot of our grown-up energies. Even if a blanket fort is the last house we build with our own hands, for most of us, the portion of our life and labor allotted to rent or mortgage payments is considerable. It's such an accepted aspect of life that it may never occur to us to ask, "What is it really for, this shelter we spend so much of ourselves securing?"

This may not sound like a particularly Christian question. But I think it is. Because as soon as you've secured shelter for yourself, the question of whom you'll welcome into it arises. And I don't think we can talk about the Christian way of life without talking about welcome.

The word "welcome" shows up six times in our tiny little three verse reading from Matthew. And Jesus speaks of welcome here in the strongest of terms. He tells his disciples that whoever welcomes them gets credit for welcoming Jesus, and whoever welcomes Jesus has welcomed God. He says that whoever welcomes a prophet basically gets credit for being a prophet. So, if your religion is about racking up credits, pay close attention. You don't actually have to eat locusts and wear animal skins yourself. You just need to extend welcome to such weirdos and you're golden.

But that's not the good news Jesus came to proclaim. His gospel is just the opposite. Jesus was trying to show us how to get free of the oppressive systems by which we earn and prove and display our goodness, and then exclude and distinguish ourselves from people we deem less than good. He was trying to get us to understand that this life is a gift, not a reward. And so is the redeeming love of God. And if we could just get that through to our thick heads and our even thicker souls we could wake up to the kingdom of heaven that's actually been right here at hand all along.

So why all the talk specifically about welcome? Well, according to Jesus, welcome isn't something good that we do to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Welcome is what the kingdom looks like when it becomes visible.

In fact, it's so essential, at the beginning of Matthew, chapter 10, Jesus is sending out his 12 disciples for the very first time to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And as he does, he says this: "You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your

belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food." In other words, he sends his disciples out conspicuously unprepared, so that they will be completely dependent upon the welcome of other people. Maybe because every time they are welcomed, the kingdom of heaven springs into view again. Their need is what makes the kingdom seeable.

Ever since I built my first blanket shelter, I liked the idea that I got to decide who to let in. And the notion that by providing for myself and my family I'm being a decent and responsible citizen goes deep. I knew the rules well enough to play at this kind of responsibility by the time I was five. But what Jesus seems to be saying is that this is the perspective my mind has to be trained out of if I'm really to comprehend the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom whose only currency is grace and gift. He seems to say I have to learn the way of utter dependence. I need to learn to live as someone dependent upon welcome. The way of the beggar, even. Isn't that how he sent out his disciples? As beggars?

Interestingly enough, the word "beggar" doesn't mean someone down on his luck in the worst way. "Beggar" comes from "Beghards," a group of mendicant friars in the 13th century in northern Europe. They were monks who went from town to town begging for their livelihood, as did the Franciscans. We see being needy as an unfortunate condition or a character flaw, but the empty bowls the Beghards carried were what they thought God had given them to offer the world.

Neediness is a drain if we believe only in the myth of productivity. That we are what we can offer. Neediness may be a sign of irresponsibility if we believe that a person's worth is defined by what they have secured for themselves.

But if the kingdom of heaven is a realm of gift and grace, if it is a realm in which our worth and even our redemption are given, not earned, well then we simply can't enter this kingdom filled up with self-sufficiency. We have to arrive with our need. Our lack. Our emptiness.

Lewis Hyde once wrote that "the wandering mendicant takes what is empty from door to door. There is no profit; he merely stays alive if the gift moves toward him. He makes its spirit visible to us. His well-being is a sign of our well-being, as his starvation would be a sign of its withdrawal."

Maybe we still miss the kingdom of heaven that's right at hand because we're so filled up with self-sufficiency that even the gift of God's love has no place to go in us.

Friedrich Schleiermacher said that the experience of being in relation with God is not first a feeling of freedom or of joy but one of absolute dependence. Jesus did him one better, sending his disciples out empty, as though creating the conditions for absolute dependence might lead to relationship with God, first for his disciples, and then for the people in the houses and the towns to which they would travel.

I don't believe for a minute that God visits pandemics on the world to teach us lessons. What I do believe is that when so much of our lives as we have known them ceases to be, we have an opportunity to see things for what they truly are. "Apocalypse" does not mean catastrophe. It means "revelation" or "uncovering." And one truth that is being uncovered right now is that the American version of the myth of independence is killing us. There is an actual virus that thrives on the illusion that my life is my own and that I'm not utterly dependent on your choices and that you're not utterly dependent upon mine.

I suppose, as a follower of Jesus, I should have been prepared for such a time as this. Jesus sent us out from the very beginning, not as bearers of gifts and resources and answers, but as bearers of need. He sent us out with no gold, or silver, or copper in our belts, no bag for our journey, so that the illusion of our independence might fall away, and the healing need for God and for one another might rush in and fill the blessed emptiness we each carry with us through this life, wherever in the world we go.