



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Everything is Cold to a Toaster

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Some years ago, I was reading a blog where doctoral-level mathematicians answer really important questions that we just do not find satisfactorily addressed in our divided national rhetoric and culture wars.

This particular blog post was trying to answer the question, “Which would win — a toaster or a freezer?”

You see, we may be lulled into some sense of thinking of toasters and freezers as functionally equivalent; a freezer makes things very cold; a toaster makes things very hot. But that’s so oversimplified that it’s wildly incorrect.

The average freezer may keep things as cold as -4° Fahrenheit. But a toaster, in order to make its coils glow, must reach a temperature of *at least* 1112° Fahrenheit. So, they aren’t equivalent; they aren’t even in the same ballpark. If your house is 68° , from the perspective of a toaster on its

way to over 1112°, that is almost the same as -4°. That temperature of -4° is cold to you and me, but everything is cold to a toaster.

One of the most extraordinary images in scripture, in all the world of human writing, is the vision Isaiah has of the Holy sitting on the throne of the heavens. This Hebrew prophet responds in this moment of rapture, ecstasy, honesty, and vulnerability:

“And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’”

Isaiah 6:5-7

When John the Baptist, or Paul, or Jesus Himself prophesies a coming fire or burning, this is part of what I understand them to mean. This coal from the altar of the Lord is so unimaginably, blindingly, and screechingly hot that the angels themselves will only hold it with tongs. And the stone touched his lips, and burned away his iniquities, and his sin was blotted out. He even survived to tell what he had seen.

For Isaiah, the words he had uttered had made him unworthy of the Lord, which he instantaneously and reflexively understood as true of himself and of his people. But we know that there were as many different amounts of *worthiness* among Isaiah’s people as there were people; each carrying their own burdens and sins. We might even presume that the prophet Isaiah was actually among the less burdened of them, and the stone burned his lips anyway.

There are people who silently suffer because they have engaged in some relatively small evils and feel unworthy of forgiveness. Likewise, there are people who are ready to repent of grave and extraordinary sin, who feel that they are not worthy of forgiveness. People are sometimes both; sometimes in-between; and sometimes make up their own rationale for feeling undeserving of God’s forgiveness.

And just for the record: they are right. We do not *deserve* forgiveness.

But we *are* forgiven. We *can* repent.

We can sometimes, in this life, even reconcile and make amends. We can and will be forgiven for things great and small. God's power to love you is so much greater than your power to mess it up. They aren't equivalent; they aren't even in the same ballpark.

The circumstances of your life and your struggle to live well do matter. Living a life of grace, forgiveness, charity, and humility do matter. Growing in love makes the world better for you and everyone with whom you interact. You could go the other way. You could be selfish, superior, filled with greed and envy. You could make the world a darker, scarier, more dangerous place for your neighbors and those who come after you. There is a difference between trying to make the world better and trying only for ourselves.

There *is* a difference between -4° and 68° , but everything is cold to a toaster.

'Woe is me,' we may cry, for we know that the best of us have not been perfect. But we know, too, that the worst of us have not done more damage than God has the power to heal. Everything we have done can be redeemed by the love, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.