

If you had asked her that morning, she probably would've said that by dinnertime, she'd be home: unpacking, unwinding, washing off the day of travel with a long luxurious shower in her own home. That's where she expected to be. She didn't expect to be here. She didn't expect to be in a middle-school-turned-emergency-shelter, taking a shower in some gymnasium locker room and drying off with some stranger's freshly-laundered towels.

But that was before. That was before the horrifying events of September 11, 2001 caused the FAA to shut down American airspace. That was before her flight -- Continental Flight 45 from Milan to Newark -- was re-routed, along with thirty-seven other flights, to the Canadian province of Newfoundland, to an all-but-forgotten airport in a dot-on-the-map town called Gander.

And just like that, the town of Gander (population 9,000) found itself inundated with 7,000 refugee passengers. 7,000 people (plus nine dogs, ten cats, and two rare Bonobo monkeys).¹ 7,000 people who would need something to eat. 7,000 people who would need toothpaste, soap, towels, toilet paper, and emergency prescriptions. 7,000 people who would need a place to take a shower. 7,000 people who would need a place to sleep. What were they going to do with 7,000 people, 7,000 "plane people" (as they called them), 7,000 "come from aways"?

"Come from aways." It's the Newfie way of saying "someone who's not from around here," "someone from somewhere else." The story of those come-from-aways stranded in Gander is the inspiration for the Broadway musical "Come From Away" -- a musical with a soundtrack I've been playing on continuous loop during my daily commute. (It's my new favorite -- check it out.) It's often referred to as "musical about September 11th" ... but its creators say that's not really the case. Really, it's a musical

¹ Jim DeFede, *The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 102.

about September 12th, a musical about how ordinary people responded to that moment of great crisis, a musical about the triumph of the human spirit.

See, in most places, an overnight doubling in population would lead to utter chaos. But this wasn't most places. This was Newfoundland. And for Newfoundlanders, "neighborliness" was -- and is -- their most striking characteristic, their highest value. It's just the Newfie way. So if the come-from-aways needed it -- whatever "it" was -- the people of Gander would provide it. They brought donations for the come-from-aways. They gave rides to the come-from-aways. They opened their homes to the come-from-aways. Literally -- strangers in their homes.

For their part, the come-from-aways found themselves bowled over by the exceptional selflessness of their hosts. That was certainly the case for Denise Gray-Felder, our aforementioned traveler, the one whose Milan-to-Newark flight had made this unexpected and extended pit stop in Gander. It's not that Gray-Felder was a stranger to charitable giving. As vice-president of administration and communications for the Rockefeller Foundation, she helped oversee a billion-dollar endowment that provided millions of dollars of charitable grants each year. Charitable giving was her living.

But for the people of Gander and its surrounding towns, charitable giving was their way of life. Gray-Felder was now on the receiving end of it, and that experience was striking. In the book *The Day the World Came to Town*, journalist Jim DeFede writes:

There was nothing the passengers needed that the people in town weren't prepared to provide. Each night the strandeers were there, several women from town would stay up until two in the morning washing loads of towels so the passengers would have fresh towels each morning when they woke up.

Gray-Felder knew people had donated the towels from their own homes, and she asked one of the women how everyone was going to reclaim their towels once the passengers left. The woman looked at her as if it was an odd question.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

The selflessness of the townspeople gave Gray-Felder chills.²

It’s one of 7,000 stories from those five days in Gander, one of 7,000 stories that captures the neighborliness and selflessness that is, apparently, just the Newfie way. It’s also a story that I think speaks to the themes in our scripture reading for today.

Throughout this whole season of Lent, you might remember, we’ll be grappling with the same scripture reading, a scripture from the prophet Isaiah, a scripture about the nature of true fasting. Rather fitting for the season of Lent, don’t you think? In the first week of this series, we focused on the point of all of this God-ordained fasting: to wake God’s people up, to open them up to God’s transformation in their lives. Last week, we talked about how God’s people occasionally slipped into self-righteousness, assuming that God’s seeming lack of response to their fasting was a sign of *God’s* unfaithfulness, rather than their own. In light of that, we challenged ourselves to fast from whatever self-righteousness is within each of us... and to feast on humility.

This week, we come back to these “fasting” words of the prophet Isaiah. We can come back to them again and again; they’re so rich with meaning. Last week, these “fasting” words taught us something important about self-righteousness. This week... I think they teach us something important about selfishness.

Selfishness? Why do we have to talk about selfishness? We’re not selfish, right? Okay, maybe we’re not at, like, the Gander level of selflessness, opening our doors and offering our towels to weary and stranded strangers... but still, we’re not selfish, right?

² Ibid., 169.

Right?!? Well... not so... fast. Not so fast. Sure, we don't often think of ourselves as selfish... but I think scriptures like this one might compel us to re-define the word. In Isaiah, we read:

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

At first, this scripture passage sounds like a whole lot of other scripture passages. At first, this scripture passage sounds like your basic biblical call to provide for the needs of the poor. But it's not. This passage is not calling us to provide for the needs of the poor. At least, that's not *all* it's calling us to do. This passage is calling us to something much deeper and more radical. Hear that last part again:

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

This passage isn't saying: *make sure the hungry have bread*. It's not saying: *make sure the homeless have shelter*. It's saying: *share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house*.

Share *your* bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless poor into *your* house. That's... that's some next-level 'providing for the needs of the poor' there. That's not the kind of 'providing for needs' that you can do from a comfortable distance. That's up close, in your face, in your stuff, in your life. That redefines generosity. That redefines selflessness. Isaiah isn't saying: *make sure they have stuff*. Isaiah is saying: *share your stuff*. God, through Isaiah, is saying: *share your stuff*.

And when we hear that... somewhere deep inside, a voice responds. It's a quiet voice, a voice we try to drown out, a voice we pretend isn't there, a voice that's more selfish than selfless. From deep within, that voice whispers: *what if I don't want to share my stuff?*

Except in Newfoundland. The people of Gander, Newfoundland clearly have no such voice, and would've had no trouble with the words of the prophet Isaiah. It must be Isaiah country up there. *Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless poor into your house*. No problems there -- that's just the Newfie way. *While we're at it, let me put the kettle on. What's mine is yours*. Perhaps those generous, neighborly, selfless citizens of Gander can teach us something about how to think about the stuff we consider "mine" -- something that might help us live into these words of the prophet Isaiah. See, I suspect that for the average person in Gander, the word "mine" is almost a foreign concept. Nothing is "mine"... not when a neighbor (or even a stranger!) is in need. Remember the towels in the shelter? *How will you reclaim your own towels once we leave?* the come-from-away asked. "It doesn't matter," the dumbfounded Newfie replied. *It doesn't matter if I get my towels back. It doesn't matter if this or that towel is "mine."* *What matters is that I could offer you a towel when you needed a towel*. Isaiah country for sure.

That voice inside of us may whisper: *what if I don't want to share my stuff?* But then... perhaps another voice, an Isaiah-rooted voice, a Christ-centered voice, a Spirit-driven voice, whispers back: *what if it's not really "mine" at all?*

What if it's not really "mine" at all? That question is about more than being charitable, generous, or selfless. That question is about what it means to be a steward of stuff rather than an owner of stuff.

What's the difference? Ownership says: *this is my stuff*. Stewardship says: *this is stuff for me to use*. Ownership says: *this is my bread*. Stewardship says: *this bread is a tool to nourish myself, my loved ones, and even strangers*. Ownership says: *this is my house*. Stewardship says: *this house is a tool to shelter myself, my loved ones, and even strangers*. Ownership says: *this is mine*. Stewardship says: *this is mine to use*.

Share your bread with the hungry, Isaiah tells us. *Bring the homeless poor into your house*. That's stewardship talk there, not ownership talk. And it sounds a bit radical, doesn't it? But maybe it's supposed to. Maybe that's the only way that God, through Isaiah, can get our attention. Maybe that's the only way that God can get us to understand: *It's not your bread. It's not your house. It's not yours. It's yours to use*. So maybe... maybe this part of Isaiah isn't really about fasting from selfishness and feasting on selflessness. Maybe this part of Isaiah is about fasting from ownership and feasting on stewardship. How do we fast from ownership and feast on stewardship? Isaiah tells us: *Share your bread with the hungry. Bring the homeless poor into your house. Because it's not your bread, and it's not your house*.

Should we take Isaiah literally? Is that literally what God is calling us to do? To leave our doors open -- to leave ourselves open -- to absolute strangers? If so, can I really open myself up to that? To be honest, I don't know. It sounds awfully risky, even foolish. Is that what God wants? Is that what it means to fast from ownership and feast

on stewardship? I'll probably spend a lifetime discerning that and fighting with God on that.

If, for the time being, I can't get all the way there... perhaps I can start by viewing my stuff differently. Can I look at the stuff I "own" and begin to view it as a tool in God's hands, rather than a possession in mine? Can I see the stuff I "own" not as "mine," but rather as "mine to use," "mine to share"? Can I see myself as a steward rather than an owner?

This is going to be hard for a great many of us. I know this, because right now, when I'm in Target, walking down the aisles that used to hold hand sanitizers and disinfecting wipes and rubbing alcohol, I see nothing but empty shelves. They're hot commodities now, thanks to coronavirus. We're buying them in bulk (if we can find them)... and something tells me we're not buying them to share. Something tells me we're buying them to hoard. Friends, we are a long way from "share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7, NRSV). So for now, maybe we can start with: *share your disinfecting wipes with your neighbor and offer your hand sanitizer to the stranger in your midst*. Because right now, maybe God, in the style of Isaiah, is saying: *It's not your sanitizer, and they're not your wipes. They're yours to use, yours to share*. Right now, maybe that -- more than anything -- looks like the gospel in action, the gospel with shoes on.

And so, my friends, in this season of coronavirus, this season when so many of us feel anxious and fearful and powerless... may you fast from selfishness and feast on selflessness. May you fast from ownership and feast on stewardship. May you "share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isaiah 58:7, NRSV). And may you share your disinfecting wipes with your neighbor and offer your hand sanitizer to the stranger in your midst.

Prayer