

BETHANY UNITED CHURCH
NOTHING IN RETURN
(from *The Dreamcatcher* by James Henderschedt)

JUNE 26, 2011
ROMANS 3:21-28
EPHESIANS 2: 4-10

(Read Romans 3: 21-28)

One day a long time ago, longer than most folks can remember, a woman came to town. No one had ever seen her before. She roused curiosity among the people in town. There was just something different about her. Most of the time people shy away from people who are strange, but there was a sort of magnetism that attracted the town's residents to her.

From almost the very moment she arrived, she went about doing things in her unique way. The first person she met was an old widow who was on her way out of town to gather sticks for her fire so that she could cook and keep warm.

"Hello there mother," the stranger hailed. "Where are you going on such a fine day as this?" "I'm on my way to gather wood. I am all alone – no sons, husband or daughters to help me." "And why must you gather wood?" "So that I may live. I make a meager living by selling the bread I bake and the stews I mix. I also need the wood so that I can cook for myself and keep warm on the cold nights. It is hard work for an old lady. But I will die if I do not do it."

"Ah well then, dear mother, let me come with you and help you for I am younger and stronger." "Oh thank you so very much," the old widow responded with sincere gratitude, "but do not bother because I will not be able to repay you."

"I ask for nothing in return other than the joy of being able to share your burden." The old woman continued to protest but the stranger paid no attention to her. So they both went into the forest. Later as the sun was beginning to set, the two women returned to town. A large bundle of sticks weighed heavily on upon the shoulders of the stranger. Slowly, and with a little difficulty, they made their way through the streets and alleyways until they came to the widow's small home.

After she lowered the wood to the ground, the younger woman straightened, placed her hands on the small of her back, and stretched to relax her cramped muscles. The widow said, "Let me at least repay you by making you a hot meal."

"Sweet mother, I do not want you to repay me. I have done this for you. It is a gift." Shaking her head as she walked away, the older woman said, "I don't understand. Thank you." The stranger watched as the old woman walked away. Tears of sadness welled up in the corners of her eyes.

The next morning, a group of mothers and their young children were gathered in the center square. Their conversation was animated. Some were angry, others were disappointed, and the rest were bewildered.

Through the small crowd of women and children walked the stranger. "What is the matter?" she asked. One woman, apparently the self-appointed spokesperson for the rest answered, "We have a problem. Everyday we go out to the fields to work. It is important work because our husbands do not earn much money and what we earn helps us to keep food on the table and our children clothed. But one of us must remain behind to watch the children. We take turns doing this. The one whose turn it was today is ill and unable to watch the children. No one is willing to remain behind today because our need for money is too great."

"Do not fret anymore," the stranger said as she smiled at a little girl who was peeking out from behind her mother's dress. "I will gladly watch your children for you as you go to the fields to work."

"Oh, thank you so much," another mother said. She looked so young, almost too young to have given birth yet three small faces beamed up at her as she spoke. "Your offer is so kind but we cannot accept because we will not be able to repay you."

"I do not want you to repay me," the stranger stated. "I want to watch your children so that you can help provide for them. It is a gift. Go on now, all of you. Off to the field with you. I will take good care of your children." At first the mothers were reluctant to leave their children with someone they did not know. However, when they saw how quickly their children responded to the woman and how they were laughing and playing together, they left for the fields confident that the children would indeed be well cared for.

All day long the woman cared for the children. They played games and sang songs. In the afternoon, they sat on a hillside and the children listened with intense rapture as the woman told stories – stories that made them laugh and stories that excited their imaginations.

All too quickly the sun began to set behind the western hills. The women returned from the fields and gathered their children. "Oh mommy," the children shouted, "we had so much fun." They told their mothers about their games and songs and the stories the stranger had told.

The spokesperson from the morning once again faced the stranger. "We are indebted to you for caring for our children. On the way home, we were talking among ourselves and decided that we all would share some of what we harvested with you as a repayment for your kind act."

“Please do not give me your food in return for my gift. It is not payment that I seek. Please accept what I did with the intent with which it was offered.” Each of the women thanked her as they herded their offspring together to make their way home. As the last mother walked out of sight, the strange woman looked on, and tears of sadness welled in the corners of her eyes.

Day after day, the woman met someone in town who was in need of help in one way or another, and she gave the gift of herself. She carried mortar for a man whose helper was called away. He had to build a chimney before winter set in. It was very hard work. Though the chimney builder was unable to give her money, he did offer to pay her with a place to sleep and a good meal prepared by his wife yet she refused payment.

Another time she milked a herd of cows so that the farmer and his wife could go to the church social. They brought home some of the leftover food to pay her for freeing them from their duties, allowing them to enjoy a night of fellowship yet she would not accept the payment. And each time, as she looked on, tears of sadness would well in her eyes.

One day, just a few weeks after she first came to town, she was holding a horse for the blacksmith as he nailed a shoe to the horse’s hoof. Just when the smithy struck the last blow, the woman fell to the ground in a faint. He lifted her in his strong arms and carried her to the office of the town physician. News spread quickly, and soon everyone to whom she had given a gift of herself gathered outside the doctor’s house.

At about noon the doctor came out and stood on the top step of his porch. He shook his head. “She’s no longer with us,” he said, almost whispering.

“But why?” the cries went up. “How did she die?” “It looks like the poor woman hadn’t eaten all the time she was here, and her strength was depleted by exhaustion.”

“No it’s not right,” the people protested. “We offered to pay her.” The widow shouted, “I offered to cook her a meal.” The mothers added, “We wanted to give her some food.” Person after person shouted his or her offer that the woman refused.

The doctor held up his hands, and the crowd became quiet. “You still don’t understand, do you? Everything you offered was payment. It is not that you were not grateful. It is just that you could not accept the gift. You had to compensate her for what she gave and did. She would have accepted what you offered if you would have given it as a gift. That is the tragedy of this whole experience. She did not want to be paid. She wanted your gift.”

“But who is she?” a man called from the back of the crowd. “We never even knew her name,” another person shouted. The doctor let his eyes slowly scan the faces of the townspeople in front of him. He knew every one of them; some of them he had brought into the world. “I know who she was. She told me her name just before she died. Her name was Grace.”

(Read Ephesians 2: 4-10)