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Psalm 126:1-6. NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)

- ¹ *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*
- ² *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”*
- ³ *The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*
- ⁴ *Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.*
- ⁵ *May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.*
- ⁶ *Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

Mark 9:36-37. New American Version, Revised Edition.

³⁶ *Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.”*

Two left gloves.

Our first reading today is from a Psalm. The Psalms are my favorite Old

Testament book; they’re poetic, and even though they are ancient, they are

elegant and highly readable. They tend to reflect raw emotions like pain and joy. This Psalm was written sometime - perhaps a long time - after the Israelites returned to the land of Israel after their forced exile by the Babylonians. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians and the Persians then allowed the Israelites to return home. The point of Psalm 126 is to tell us about the joy felt by God's people when they are lifted up and out of oppression. By the way, we recently looked at a Psalm of Ascent, one of a handful of Psalms that were offered by thankful Jews as they made religious pilgrimages. This is another Psalm of Ascent. As a note, because it refers to reaping and sowing, Christians often use Psalm 126 at Thanksgiving time.

But what motivated this Psalm? Well, obviously, the Israelites were offering thanks for regaining their land, including Jerusalem, their holy city. But let's look at the broader context. Why did God arrange for them to be able to go home? It has to do with what we call the Old Covenant, the agreement between God and the Israelites. In Bible language, we call it a covenant, but the Old Testament authors, in the way they describe this covenant, were probably influenced by something called a suzerain contract. This was a concept in wide use during the time and in the place where much of the Old Testament was written. This is a contract where one of the two parties, the suzerain, wields the

true power. The suzerain sets up the conditions of the contract, but both sides must follow the contract. Often the suzerain was a king or a powerful invader, and the second party were the people of an area that had been conquered or absorbed. In the Old Testament covenant, God was of course the suzerain. But as with any good contract, the two parties received something of reasonably equal value. Here is how God engineered his suzerain contract with the Israelites. God promised to provide three things: land, progeny (or descendants), and God's blessing. In return, the Israelites had to live according to certain rules of morality. In the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon is presented as a punishment for the Israelites not honoring their side of their covenant with God the suzerain. Their crime consisted of practicing idolatry. This is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, God using the armies of enemies of the Israelites to punish them when they didn't follow their side of their covenant with God. But the people had eventually turned back to God – and they thus earned God's favor. So, they were able to return to Jerusalem.

The Israelites, and later the Jews, had to do certain things to get God's protection. That's how the Old Covenant worked. But we don't live under the suzerain contract of the Old Testament. We do have a covenant with God, however. The biggest requirement of that covenant by far is that we have faith in

God. But we don't have to follow a complex system of laws. The New Covenant is sometimes called the Covenant of Grace, and it says that we earn God's favor simply by having faith; the gifts of the New Covenant thus come freely and do not have to be earned, like the gifts and the protections of the Old Covenant.

Consider our second reading for the day. This story from the Gospel of Mark happens to come at the end of a passage where Jesus' disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest. This was common among Mediterranean men in ancient times; they competed to be the most honored. In this story, Jesus wants to teach them about humility, because that is one of the things Jesus asks of us - to be humble. Importantly, in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, children were held in low regard and were expected to be obedient and highly dependent on adults. They didn't have the freedom that children in our society have today. In fact, you'll see that I have used a somewhat obscure translation of the Bible for the quote; I did this to illustrate that in some translations, the child Jesus refers to in this passage is not called "him" or "her", but rather, "it". So, in our quote from Mark, Jesus is identifying himself with the lowest members of society by showing his love for a child, for an "it". He's telling his disciples that they should do the same; and in fact, Jesus is telling them that whatever they do for a child or for some other lowly person, they are doing for Jesus - and

ultimately for God. Remember, that in the New Covenant, God's or Jesus' love, his protection, like his protection of this child, is completely unearned.

Starting in seventh grade, I picked citrus with Mexican migrant workers. I would ride my bike to the shacks that Sunkist provided for them, getting there not long after dawn. We would climb into the back of trucks. We would sit facing each other along two benches that ran down the sides of each truck. Now, at the beginning of the picking season, each of us was issued a large canvas sack with a shoulder strap, a pair of clippers, and two pairs of long leather gloves. The gloves were very important; the boys picked mostly lemons because the ladders were shorter than the ladders used with orange trees - but the lemon trees had sharp thorns. One morning, as I was riding out in a truck, I opened my canvas bag and realized that I had grabbed two left gloves. That meant I had no glove for my right hand, my clipping hand. The thorns would shred my hand and forearm. I was panic-stricken, horrified. I'll get back to this story...

Let's talk about this church, here in Pierce. The United Methodist Church, along with its predecessors in the Methodist movement, have a long tradition of small churches. I am so happy to be serving a small church. This is because a small church provides an environment that makes it easy to grow close to one's fellow congregants. It's a perfect setting for carrying out that mission of

emulating Christ by living by the New Covenant. We show unearned grace for each other. We are brothers and sisters, and that is how we live within our faith family. In doing so, we also reinforce in each other another underlying lesson of the New Covenant – to offer our grace to *all* people.

As you go out into the world today and for the rest of the week, look for opportunities to perform acts of kindness for someone who has not earned it. Maybe there is a person with whom you have had a shaky relationship at work or in the neighborhood or even in this church. Surprise that person with something simple. Do a favor for them. Or just be friendly. Try looking at life from that person's perspective. How many of us could easily name a couple of people who, if they simply displayed friendship with us or trust in us, would bring us great joy? And don't forget that you can immediately feel the joy of doing something for that other person. That's the secret blessing of the New Covenant. When we offer something unearned for someone, we feel the joy of living like Christ.

Do you know what you're doing, when, as members of a small Methodist faith family, you reach out and give unearned grace to other people? You're doing what Jesus did. You're carrying out the will of God's New Covenant with his people. You're also doing something that was done for me that day in the back of that truck when I realized that I had two left gloves, when I knew that my arm

would be shredded by thorns. You see, across from me was an elderly man whom I had picked with several times. It was common for the older men to pick with the boys. I knew that this man sent almost all of what he earned back to Mexico to help his daughter feed his grandchildren. That was his life – to provide for children. This man reached out across the truck and took one of my left gloves. Then, finger by finger, he turned it inside out. I was rescued. I now had a right glove. The man gave me a big grin. This man had found another child to serve. That man who performed the miracle of transforming a left glove into a right glove didn't have to help me. He could have just sat there silently, perhaps feeling sorry for himself because he earned so little and had almost nothing in life. But he was living a life that mirrored that of Jesus – giving unearned love and protection to a child.

The men I picked with took to heart this teaching that powerless people like children should be embraced. When I was picking in the orchards, the men looked after the boys. A foreman might give a boy like me a hard time, perhaps because I was filling the bottom of my crates with over-ripe fruit I had picked up off the ground – something that of course I absolutely never did, well, at least I didn't do it every day. The point is that when a foreman verbally laid into one of the boys, the men would climb down their ladders and come between the

foreman and the boy. If you want to yell at someone, yell at a man, they would explain.

As part of their contract with Sunkist, the pickers from Mexico were given a hot lunch in the orchard each day. Since I wasn't a migrant, I wasn't supposed to get any of this food. But the men would insist that I eat. They didn't get extra food because I was there, but they shared what they had. To them, it was ridiculous for me to decline. I was a child. They were believers. I was to be cared for. That care was completely unearned on my part – as dictated by the New Covenant. It's often the people who have the least in the world, who take the least from it, who show the most grace for others. That's the New Covenant in action. That is how our God wants us to live. And don't forget, we receive an immediate, earthly joy when we offer grace to others – just like that elderly man, and the men who fed me in the field and defended me from the foremen, they received the joy of serving me in the name of the New Covenant.

I'd like to end with a prayer.

God, we thank you for your grace, which acts within us every day and every night of our lives. It's there when our faith is fervent. It's there when we are in the depths of our greatest doubt. It's there in all its fullness when we are sure

there cannot be any God. And it is your grace that comes to us unearned and that renews our faith, no matter what has been going on in our lives.

We ask that you give us the strength to serve those around us, because that is what we learn by examining the actions and words of Jesus. May we be especially careful to extend grace toward those who are not practicing Christians. We know that by receiving unexpected love from a believer, non-believers sometimes come to realize that they are loved by you, God.

May all people learn the powerful truth of the New Covenant. No longer are your children required to perform acts, to follow specific rules or give offerings to you in order to earn your love and your protection. We act freely in your name and not because it is required. This world is filled with war and hunger. There are populations on the move escaping oppression. There are millions of children who are not cared for. We ask that your grace protect all these people and make them aware of your eternal love for them. And we seek your guidance in learning how we can help those in need. Amen.