

## **“Of Onions and Castaways”**

Why We Give

November 9, 2009

Ephesians 4:17-24

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

**Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God . . .**

“Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; ‘She once pulled up an onion in her garden,’ said he, ‘and gave it to a beggar woman.’ And God answered: ‘You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.’

The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. ‘Come,’ said he, ‘catch hold and I’ll pull you out.’ he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. ‘I’m to be pulled out, not you. It’s my onion, not yours.’ As soon as she said that, the onion broke.”<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

I am Pi. I am sixteen. I am from India. I boarded a cargo ship along with my family and all of our zoo animals. We are selling them to zoos in North America and we are moving to Canada. Only, something awful happens in the night, and our ship sinks.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov* (Fyodor Dostoyevsky)

I somehow manage to get to a lifeboat, but I am the only human on board. I do have company, though, a hyena and a wounded zebra. Later on two more animals climb aboard: a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, and an orangutan named Orange Juice. I was happy to see Orange Juice, not so happy to see Richard Parker! Sadly, it's not long before Richard Parker is the only animal on board, besides me, that is. I manage to stay out of his way (it is a very large lifeboat). I made a raft for myself so I don't have to *sleep* on the lifeboat with him. I find equipment for de-salting water, along with a lot of provisions, and I quickly learn how to fish.

Sharing a lifeboat with a 450 pound Bengal tiger is seriously problematic. It's either 'Richard Parker or me.' I spend endless hours pondering ways I might eliminate him. I decide to let nature take its course. He'll die of thirst or hunger. After all, I have limited resources; I am lost at sea. I have to hoard what I have. I am not going to share water with a tiger who's bound to attack me! Then it starts to rain. As I watch him drink the collected rainwater, I realize there's no way I can outlast Richard Parker<sup>2</sup>.

\* \* \*

Two weeks ago we considered God who is the Giver of all. We remembered that God is the basis of all giving. God is our source. We don't OWN anything in the first place (even ourselves!). Everything is from God. Today we consider what it means to be created in the image of God, created to be GIVERS.

Paul minces no words: our "Old Self" falls way short of who we were created to be. Our "Old Self" is pitiful! We have so much of the "Onion mentality" about us. If we just hang on tighter to what we have, we'll get what we need! We'll take care of ourselves (and our loved ones, of course). Why should we share? There's too many people out there to share with, anyway! There won't be enough left for us!

There's so much "Lifeboat thinking" in us, too, especially when we are stressed. We batten down the hatches. It's a cutthroat world; you gotta play by those rules or you'll be eaten alive. Our lifeboat thinking (our onion thinking) is a philosophy of scarcity. It is driven by fear, not by faith. We tend to think this way even when things are not all that scarce. When I build up a big nest egg, when I get a better job, when the kids finish college, when I pay off this loan, THEN I'll start giving more, then I will start volunteering . . .

---

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase summary of the story told in *The Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel.

Let's look at how Paul describes the "Old Self", the person without Christ. Corrupt. Deceitful. Ignorant. Hardened. Greedy. Lusting for more. We know exactly what Paul's talking about-- the OLD SELF. The self that doesn't know Christ. The self that is only occupied with the self. The Grinch whose heart is three sizes too small.

But wait! The good news is this---God created us for more! God wants to enlarge our hearts. God created us in God's image---to be GIVERS. We don't have to be stuck in the OLD oniony, Grinchy SELF. God kicks us in the pants regularly (sometimes with things as frightening as Richard Parker!) so we don't have to settle for that old futility.

When we are what God created us to be---givers---life becomes extraordinary. We discover contentment that can't come from anything else. Unless we are what we were created to be, we will always be unfulfilled. We hopelessly cling to onions and lifeboats. We will be dragged down by the very things we are so desperately trying to shake free of.

Paul uses baptismal language. Putting on the new self, like putting on a new piece of clothing, like getting a brand new name. Living into our baptism, taking to heart the vows we made to follow Christ. *It means something* important, something life-changing, when we say Jesus Christ is our Lord, when we commit to our community of faith. It's got to be more than just words. It means we have to do something. Letting go of "Old Self" is the hardest thing we have to do.

Sometimes we do this by an act of will. We *stop doing* something that was harmful (smoking, gossiping, scheming, hoarding). We *start doing* something that fills us with joy (volunteering, nurturing, donating, loving). Sometimes it is imposed on us. Often it is something beyond our control. Something makes us cast away the old self: a death, a birth, a divorce, falling in love, an accident, a windfall, a serious health problem, an unanticipated change. When we see these changes as opportunities, we are bound to mature in our walk of faith. When we let go of our OLD WAYS, we are bound to discover who we really are, and we are bound to give more.

Giving is something we all have to work at, because the OLD Oniony SELF likes to barge in and take over. Everything in our culture tells us to hoard, keep it to ourselves! Yet strangely, when we give more, we find we have more to give! Astonishingly, the more we give, the more satisfied we are. Life becomes extraordinary when we give extraordinarily because God's giving flows through us and fills us.

Being givers saves us. Why do we give? To do good, yes. To fulfill the gospel, yes. To keep the church running, yes. To fulfill our own need to give, yes. For a tax write off, yes. To deepen and mature in our walk of faith, yes. All of the above. But there's more! We give because that is WHO WE ARE. Giving saves us.

\* \* \*

I am Pi. Fortunately, I discovered something before Richard Parker ate me. I abandoned my ridiculous plan to outlast him. I decided instead to figure out how to LIVE WITH him. I had learned this from my father. It was the last gift he gave me. I had nothing but time on my hands.

In the author's own words:

"I will come clean. I will tell you a secret: a part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful. I *am* grateful. It's the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story."<sup>3</sup>

We all need a Richard Parker. Something to get our attention about what we are really doing (or not doing). A force to reckon with that puts everything else in perspective. Richard Parker is one way God prompts us to give.

"To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that [giving]/love is the reason for my existence, for God is [giving]. [Giving] is my true identity: selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name. If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest or fulfillment, [it cannot give me] joy."<sup>4</sup>

For the love of God, for the love of humanity, for the love of ourselves, may God make us all better givers.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Book of Hours*.