

Sharing In Heaven

a message for all ages

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Wade in the water. Have any of you ever gone wading? I used to do it a lot more when I was a kid. It's different when you walk with your feet under water, isn't it? When you walk on the ground, you usually leave footprints. Did you ever look where you were walking and see the prints that your shoes made? Maybe you could tell which footprints were yours because of the design on the bottom of your shoes. If you looked in the water where you were wading, would you see footprints? No. There are no footprints in the water.

"Wade in the Water" is called a "message" song. It has two levels of meaning: one on the surface, and one hidden. It's like water in this way. When you look at water, you see the top of the stream or lake or ocean. But the greater part of the water is under the surface, underwater. This is where fish and whales and dolphins live, there are underwater rocks and canyons and mountains – but we can't see them from up here in the air part of the world where we live. And when we wade in the water we are walking under the surface. So you can't see your footprints.

If someone wanted to follow you on a dusty path, they might be able to tell where you went by looking for your footprints. But if you were wading in the water, they couldn't do that.

Well, "Wade in the Water" is a song that comes out of the African-American experience of slavery. In the earlier days of our country, African Americans could be owned as slaves and treated like animals. They knew they were really people like everybody else, so they didn't like being slaves. They knew it was wrong and wanted to be free, but the laws said they couldn't run away. If they did, their owners would use dogs to track them and find them and bring them back. The dogs could find them with their noses. The dogs could smell their footprints.

But you don't leave any footprints if you walk in the water. If an escaping slave came to a river and went across and kept on going, the dogs could smell

where they got to the water, but then the trail would stop. If people walked in the water, they could lose the dogs and the people chasing them. Then they could go back onto the land later and no one would know where they were. So they had a better chance of finding their way to freedom.

This song told people about wading in the water so they could get away. It talks about Moses and the Israelites running away from slavery in Egypt, and how the water helped them. So African-American slaves who heard and sang this song could learn a better way to escape to freedom.

The people who made up this song were probably already free, but they wrote it as a gift to the people who were still slaves. Most slaves did not escape, but they all sang this song so that those who did escape could have a better chance. So “Wade in the Water” is a song of hope, a song of teaching, and a song of generosity – a gift from people who didn’t need it or couldn’t use it to people they didn’t know; people who might be able to use it to escape. It is a song that tells people that they have worth and dignity, just like the ancient Israelites, and have every right to be free; and that they are important.

Here, today in our lives, everybody wants to be important. What happens to us is important. We want good things to happen to us. We want to feel good. But sometimes we don’t feel good; we feel bad.

When we are sick and someone takes care of us, that feels good. We’re achy and tired and hot and someone brings us some medicine or soup, and maybe tucks us back into bed. Sometimes they might give us some soup, or tell us a story, or say kind things like they’re sorry we don’t feel good and they hope we’ll feel better soon, but in the meanwhile we should just rest and take it easy so we can get better.

Sometimes we’re hungry and maybe even a little grouchy because our stomachs think it’s time to eat even though it’s not dinner time yet. And maybe someone gives us a little treat or a snack to eat that helps us to feel better until dinner. Sometimes we might get a smile or a kind word along with that little cookie or piece of fruit or carrot or whatever. The snack is nice, but it feels really good when we get that smile and sweet look. It’s like we are eating some very special love just for us that we got along with our snack.

But sometimes we’re so hungry or grouchy or needy that we don’t much care where our food came from or how anybody else feels about it as long as we

get what we want. Because we feel like our needs are so important, we want everyone to just take care of us and give us what we want. We can end up like the parts of the house that argued with each other that each one was more important than the others, or the family members who argued that everyone else should treat them like the most important person in the house.

The Cherokee people have a story about this. Barbara Kingsolver tells us about it in one of her books that's called *Pigs In Heaven*. It's night time and two people are sitting outside looking up at the sky, finding the groups of stars called constellations. They see the constellation called the Big Dipper, or the Great Bear, and the Little Dipper, or the Little Bear, the one that has the North Star in it. And then one of them points to a little cluster of stars and calls it the Pleiades, the Sisters. The other person, who is a Cherokee, says that his people have a different name for it, The Six Bad Boys, or The Six Pigs in Heaven.

He explains that the Cherokee have a story about six boys who wouldn't do their work. They just wanted their mothers to feed them and take care of them so they could play all the time. They were so greedy and unthankful and mean to their mothers that one day their mothers decided that if they were going to be bad boys, they would cook them bad food. All their mothers made them some really disgusting soup, and the boys got mad. They said, "Forget it, only a pig would eat this," and they rushed out to play ball, asking the spirits to listen, yelling that their mother were treating them like pigs. And it seemed that the spirits listened to them. The spirits figured, "Well, a mother knows best," and they turned the boys into pigs. They ran faster and faster till they were just a blur. Their little hooves left the ground and they rose up into the sky, and there they are.

These selfish, greedy boys were turned into pigs in the sky, pigs in heaven, where everyone could look up and see what happened to people who weren't nice, who didn't help those who helped them, like their mothers.

Sometimes we feel all alone, like there isn't anyone to help us. And we might decide that the only way to get what we want and feel good is to take it for ourselves. Maybe our mother says "no," or our father is busy, so we sneak our own snack instead of asking.

Sometimes we might feel like the only way for anything good to happen is if we do it for ourselves. So we do special things to make us feel better. We eat

what we want whether or not anyone else thinks it's a good idea. Or we take the things we want because we think we should have them even if they're not ours.

Finally, we might grow up to work hard to get what we want – maybe money, or a big house, or nice clothes, or a car, or a trip to the beach. We work and work and try so hard to have that good feeling we used to have when someone was nice to us and gave us a treat. But we find that no matter how many treats we give ourselves, they don't make us feel as good as we want them to. Some people get mad because they don't feel better and they're angry that everybody else doesn't try to make them feel better. So they tell other people that they should be nice to them because they're important.

You'd think that getting what you want would make you happy. Isn't that what all the ads on TV show us? But, it turns out that selfishness, putting your needs first, just doesn't work. That's what all the religions say: selfishness doesn't work. Sure, we need to have some things – like food – just to stay alive, but it turns out that what makes people feel really the best is the smile and kind words and nice eyes that we get from the people who like us.

That kindness we receive is something we can't take – it can only be given to us by someone else. We can't even make them give it to us the way we might make someone give us a toy that we want. We can't argue someone into thinking we're important; they can only decide for themselves.

It turns out that you can't take love and kindness; you can only give them away. But the more you give away, the more people around you will be glad to see you. And the more they are glad to see you, the more they will like you. And the more they like you, the nicer they'll be to you.

Of course, it's not always that simple. A lot of people stay confused about this, and stay angry and demanding, wanting people to give to them without having to give anything in return. But if things are going to work out, it's because somebody decides to give.

Think about what happens when two people meet on a narrow path. Somebody has to move if they're going to pass by each other. One person steps aside and says, "After you," to the other one. And that works fine. What if nobody wanted to get out of the way because each thought they were more important than the other? They'd crash into each other, and maybe fight. Eventually somebody would get hurt and be sad. The winner might feel good to make the

other person move, but the fight wouldn't help anybody like each other and want to be nice.

Selfishness just doesn't work. The ancient Hebrew people in the Bible had a number of traditions that were important to their religion and helped them to be less selfish. First, there was keeping the sabbath, spending one day a week concentrating on our relationships and deep values, one day when we don't try to get things for ourselves. And then there was "tithing," or giving a tenth of your money to causes you think are important. The ancient Hebrews had another one, too, called "gleaning."

Gleaning happened in a farmer's field after the crops were harvested. Poor people who didn't have enough land or money to get the food they needed could go into a field and take what was left over. But for this to work, the farmer couldn't harvest all the food; some had to be left behind so that the gleaners would have something to pick up. So the farmer had to think about the people who didn't have enough to eat and not be too greedy. This meant that, even though the farmer owned the whole field, planted and tended all the crop, the farmer couldn't take it all. The farmers had to just walk away and leave a good bit of food behind, no matter how much they might want to keep it for themselves. In this way, the poor people always had enough to eat because everyone saved food for them.

Can you imagine not taking everything that is yours? It feels so good when someone gives us something extra, doesn't it? Maybe the way that the most people can feel good is if everybody tries to give extra to each other.

There's something called a "baker's dozen". You know, there are twelve of something in a dozen, like a dozen donuts. But a generous baker might give you thirteen donuts when you pay for twelve. That's the kind of getting extra that people like. If you paid for 12 and only got 11, you might get mad. But if you paid for 12 and got 13, you might feel like the baker was a really nice person for giving you more than you'd paid for.

But in gleaning, people feel good because they take less than they could. If you bought 12 and decided to take only 11 so that someone else who couldn't afford to buy a donut could have one, you might feel good. And they might feel good that someone thought they were important enough to save some donuts for them.

The message of gleaning might be: give one extra; take one less. The baker's dozen may be the number we would give, but the taker's dozen would only have 11 in it, so that we could always make sure that other people could have enough and feel important, too.

There's a story about heaven and hell that involves food. Heaven is like a place where people are happy forever because of their wise choices, and hell is like a place where people are unhappy forever because of unwise choices. Well, this person was on a tour of hell. There was a big table with people sitting all around, and it was covered with every kind of delicious food. But instead of hands at the ends of their arms, they had spoons. And the spoons were too long to reach their mouths. So there was all that food in front of them, but they were starving because when they tried to put it in their mouths, it would go over their shoulders or heads, and never in their mouths. Everyone was very hungry and upset and unhappy.

Then the tour went to heaven, and it was amazing! It was exactly the same scene! The same big table covered with delicious food, and the same long-handled spoons on the end of people's arms. But everyone was happy. Why? Instead of trying to feed themselves with spoons that they couldn't get into their mouths, they were feeding each other instead! By giving instead of taking, everyone had enough food, and everyone felt important, too!

The difference between heaven and hell is that heaven is where people share. And that could be the difference between happiness and unhappiness right here. When we share, everyone can have enough, and everyone can be the most important.

So, if you want to be happy, try giving instead of taking. Remember how good it feels when someone gave you something? It also feels really, really good to be that person who gives.