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REMEMBER TO RECYCLE

This past weekend, as I am writing this, I read an article in my local newspaper about recycling electronic waste. (That is, the physical electronic waste, not the stuff that you can see on electronic equipment. That could be another article entirely.) The article said that electronic waste is a growing problem for many landfills because of its size and the dangerous compounds found within it. Computer monitors, for instance, in our landfills contaminate the soil with lead and other heavy metals. Part of the problem with electronic waste is that it is almost entirely recyclable. Roughly 98% of all electronic waste—televisions, videocassette recorders, microwave ovens, and computers—can be recovered and recycled. The lead, gold, and silver that become dangerous in landfills can be extracted. Wires can be melted down and used for making new wire components. There are companies that take the plastic cases of computers and monitors, grind them up, and turn them into plastic playground materials. And, of course, many computers can be refurbished and donated to people in poorer areas of Central America or Africa.

Now, what is my purpose in bringing this up in this context? First of all, I am doing what some see as a Christian duty to preserve the earth. If I can remind just a few people of the value of recycling these items I have managed to save a little bit of the earth.

My main intent, though, is to introduce a more profound (I hope) thought. God is a master at recycling. He can take a wasted life and recycle not 98% but 100% of the raw material.

When God created man, he saw that his creation was good. Some time after that, however, the man he created violated the one commandment he had been given. Sin came into the earth, and with sin came death.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. (Rom 5:12-14)

Unrecycled, we are like that electronic waste. We are useless to ourselves, and toxic to others. We are taking

up space in a landfill, even though we are fully recyclable. Sin shorts out our circuit boards; self-centeredness causes our operating system to crash. On our own we are virtually valueless.

God sees our value, however. Because we are made in his likeness, he knows our component parts. "But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." (Lk 12:7) God sees in us the potential for recycling.

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. (Rom 6:3-6)

When God recycles us, we are buried, like in a landfill. Unlike the waste, however, he raises us out of that burial to be a new creation. What will we be? Maybe we will be playground equipment. Maybe we will be sent to Central America as a new computer. Maybe our old friends won't even recognize us. "Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot." (1 Pet 4:3-4) What we become is not up to us. The microwave does not tell the recycler what he will be. What we will be, though, is valuable, not only to God but also to ourselves and our neighbors.

If we are Christians we are not junk. We have been recycled.

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A FIRST FOR THE TEACHER

After some of John's followers had talked to the Teacher, he spoke to the crowd. The Teacher was not very complimentary. He said, "This generation is like a bunch of children who say to each other, we played for you but you did not dance. We told you to mourn, but you did not cry. We don't want to play with you any more. John came like an Essene, very austere, eating little and drinking less, and they call him a devil. I came eating and drinking and they call me a drunkard and a glutton."

That reminded me of an incident that happened shortly after I met the Teacher. He had, incidentally, seen John a couple of days before this incident. I understand they were related, but they were very different. John had been raised south of Jerusalem near the Salt Sea, and the teacher in the north near the Galil. You couldn't miss John with his long hair and clothes made of skins, but the Teacher fit in with the crowd. But both had a passion for The Name, each in his own way.

But I digress. After he had been immersed by John, the Teacher had called a few people to follow him. I was privileged to be among those. A couple of days later, the Teacher went to a wedding

"It's not my time," he said. Over the next three years I would hear that phrase a lot.

Now John would never have been caught dead at a wedding feast. Fancy parties were not his style. And they probably would not have wanted him there, either. For sometimes a week people would have access to nearly unlimited food and drink. It was not unusual for people who had never even met the bride or the groom to be at one of these shindigs. That was how I got in. The Teacher was invited, and the invitation allowed him to bring some of his followers. Apparently he was already gaining a reputation as a teacher. So we came with him.

A lot of people looked forward to weddings. They were not necessarily merely pleased for the happy couple. Often such celebrations were the best meals people would eat all year. Meat was not common daily, but could be found in abundance here. The wine was also abundant. Music and gaiety were evident. I was glad to get to go. After all, even now there were rumors that the Teacher planned on

traveling a lot, so good meals might be few and far between. (We were on the road a lot, but we never starved, the rumors notwithstanding.)

This party was held in a public building, Cana's mikva. Apparently, though, this was a relatively poor family. Don't get me wrong. They threw quite a bash. But it was not one of those weeklong affairs. After a while you could tell that it was getting harder for them to keep the tables stocked. The wine, never very strong in the first place, was clearly being watered down to make it stretch. Some people, not willing to embarrass their hosts, were already making excuses so they could leave and not be a burden.

I was standing with the Teacher at the still-stocked food table when his mother approached. This party was where I first met the Teacher's mother. Like many women, she was publicly fairly quiet. But she could handle her children with just a look or word. She was, after all, mother to a fairly good-sized family.

Anyway, his mother took the Teacher aside, but not so far I couldn't hear her. There was still food, but it seems the wine had run out. Not wanting her friends to be embarrassed by this, she was asking her son to do something. I figured she was asking him to go buy some more wine, so the host would not have to know that he was in danger of running out. I thought his answer was strange. "It's not my time," he said. What did time have to do with it? We were not planning on being anywhere specific. Was he just not ready to leave yet? Did he have to leave, and buying wine would delay his departure? Over the next three years I heard this phrase a lot, but this was the first time I heard it. I know now what his time was, and that he was saying he was not ready yet to reveal who he was. At the time, however, it just sounded strange.

Whatever I thought he had meant, his mother just ignored him. She was his mother, and she wanted him to do something, so he sure better do it. She called a couple of servants over and, loud enough so that the Teacher and some of the rest of us could hear, she told them, "Do whatever he tells you." Now, the Law says to "honor your mother," so what could the Teacher do? These servants were awaiting his instructions. To ignore them would be to bring dishonor on his mother. Besides, he was, after all, a dutiful son.

Near where we were standing were some stone reservoirs. These were sometimes filled with water for the mikva. The purification was supposed to be done in flowing water. Sometimes, though, the stream might not provide sufficient water for immersion. These containers held two to three amphorae, about twenty-four gallons,

each, and could be used to supplement the flowing water to fill the mikva. The teacher told the servants to fill each of these stone basins with water. I don't know where the servants were able to come up with that much water at a moment's notice. I am amazed even now that they were able not to draw attention to themselves as they filled the containers. What I do know for sure was that it was a lot of water—clear, refreshing water—that they put into those containers. I know, because I was thirsty watching them, and sneaked a drink of it myself. Hey, who's going to miss one cup of water out of 144 gallons? It was unquestionably water they were pouring in.

It took a little while to fill that much water, but eventually it was done. But what good did this accomplish? What we needed was wine, not water. There had been enough water in the wine as it stood, but he didn't even throw in a few raisin cakes to make it taste like weakened wine. This was water, pure and simple.

The Teacher took one of the servants aside, dipped a cup into the water, and told the servant to take it to the head caterer. I would almost swear that I heard the teacher whisper to his mother, "Watch this."

I was concerned for the Teacher's sake. So I watched the servant make his way to the head caterer. As a side note, the actual title of this man translates to the "head of the three beds." He was responsible for setting up the dining room, supervising the food and drink, and making sure everybody was properly served. Since a dining couch really consisted of three beds, two low couches on each side of a third a little higher to put the food on, this man was the boss of the three beds. But I digress again.

I watched as the head caterer took a drink from the cup. When his eyes widened I thought, the Teacher is in for it now. The head caterer immediately went to find the bridegroom, not always an easy task. I followed him, in case I had to defend my master. When he found the bridegroom he took him aside and had him take a drink from the cup.

He said to the bridegroom, "I know the custom is to serve the good wine first, and then after people are too drunk to know the difference they serve the inferior stuff."

At that point I expected him to chide the bridegroom. I thought he might say something like, "but you, you get them drunk and then try to pass off plain water as wine. I have never known anyone with such gall."

Instead, he said, "But you, you have saved the best for last. I have never tasted wine like this before."

I hope nobody was watching me because my jaw must have been scraping the floor. How could this have been good wine? I know the head caterer did not get drunk on the job. I never took my eyes off of that cup. It had contained water. Only water. The only people who had

handled the cup were the servant, who had sneaked a sip, the caterer, and the bridegroom.

As I walked back toward the teacher I felt a jab in my ribs. The servant who had carried the cup had elbowed me. When I looked at him, he gave me a wink. He knew it was wine, and he knew where it had come from. I was only now beginning to realize what had happened myself.

This was the first miracle, of many, that I saw the Teacher perform. I have talked to those people who were with him before I joined the group, and they say they never saw him perform one before. Since the Teacher left us I have heard some people, who have no way of knowing, claim that the Teacher had done miraculous little tricks when he was a child, just to entertain himself. I don't believe it. I am convinced I was there to see the first miracle he performed.

Servants being servants, it was not long before the word got around. People who tasted the wine praised God for allowing such a miracle. And that is just as it should be.

Now, here we were months later, and the Teacher was saying that those who chose not to believe in him

When the head caterer's eyes widened, I thought, "The Teacher is in for it now."

were, perhaps, using this miracle against him. Maybe they were saying that if he could turn water into wine, what would keep him from doing so whenever he wanted to get a little drunk? Just because a while later he would feed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, maybe they thought that we gorged ourselves every night. I can tell you for a fact that these things are not true. My belly can tell you that.

Still, once a rumor gets started, it is impossible to squelch it. Some of these people who opposed the Teacher were very good at spreading rumors. No wonder he told us to follow their teachings but not their actions. It was through this very rumormongering that they were able to have him executed. I will be nice and use that word instead of assassinated.

But it is good sometimes to remember that first miracle. What these accusers forget is that he did not perform it for himself. He did it because his mother asked him to. But I really think he did it because he did not want the bridegroom to be embarrassed. He always seemed to know how other people felt.

(Based on Luke 7:31-34 and John 2:1-11)

IN THE GHETTO

Day one in the ghetto. It doesn't matter which ghetto; it could be Krakow, Warsaw, or Lodz. At evening candles begin appearing in windows. The authorities may not think anything unusual is happening, except a great waste of rare candles. The authorities probably don't even know what day it is.

Day two in the ghetto. At evening two candles appear in the windows. Now the authorities are sure what is happening. It is cold and it is dark, but the candles are not for warmth and they are not for personal light. In fact, halacha says that you cannot use the light from these candles for personal use such as reading.

Day three in the ghetto. Because of security crackdowns there may be fewer windows with candles, but this time there are three lights in those windows that have them.

Days four, five, six, and seven in the ghetto. The number of windows with candles may decrease, but the number of candles increases each day. After all, the holiday began as a result of defiance against cruel authority that was trying to destroy a race of people. The descendants of those same people carry on the tradition. Whether the oppressors call themselves Seleucids or Nazis, the lights represent resistance to oppression. The lights say I am who I am and I broadcast my belief in God regardless of what you do to me.

By now you realize that it was Hanukkah. The lights celebrate victory. Yes, for victory to happen some will die. But yes, there will be in every generation those who celebrate victory and defy oppression. There will be those who serve as an example to the sensitive among the oppressors. "I will also give you as a light to the nations, that you may be

my salvation unto the end of the earth." (Isa 49:6)

Many years ago a young rabbi taught a lesson about light. He may not have been thinking about Hanukkah. On the other hand, maybe he was talking about the requirement that the Hanukkah lights be placed in a window where those passing by can easily see them. He said, "Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a peck measure, but on a candlestick; and it gives light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Mtt 5:15-16)

God expects his people to be seen. God expects his people to stand up for him. What would you think of a friend who deserted you in times of trouble? Would you not consider rejecting him as a friend? Would you not think twice about relying on him the next time?

When King Nahash was coming against Israel, the people cried to Samuel for a king. (1 Sam 12:12) They wanted a man to lead them in battle like the other nations. Rather than being a light to the nations, the people of Israel were looking to other nations for their light. What did God say to Samuel? "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." (1 Sam 8:7)

Surely there were some in the ghetto who said, "Why stir up trouble? We can celebrate without drawing attention with candles." All the martyrs, "from the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple," might say that running away is giving up the fight. If the lights are not in the window, the war is lost.

Hanukkah begins December 5 this year.

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