

Inside the Junk Drawer

Most folks I know have a junk drawer, and I'm no different from most folks. The first drawer closest to the kitchen door is the designated one—and not long ago, the drawer refused to open. At first I ignored this minor inconvenience, but in a short time I realized that although the contents of my junk drawer are a random assemblage of uncategorized stuff, I open it quite a lot. Because you never know: that odd thing I'm looking for just *might* be tucked inside.

When the unavailable contents of my junk drawer began to torment me, I stuck my head underneath the cabinet to see if I could fix the jam. The drawer had simply fallen off its “track,” and needed to be pulled completely out and set right again. Doing so took a while, but when I finally succeeded I decided there was no better time than the present to take an inventory of my junk. Everything was in full view with the drawer pulled out—even the stuff I hadn't seen in years.

Stuff like a new deck of airline playing cards, cellophane wrapper still intact. A half-used roll of silver duct tape. A few petrified pieces of Halloween candy, year of origin unknown. My dog's first tiny puppy collar, just big enough for my own wrist. A Polaroid photo of an old friend and me, taken in a room I didn't recognize. Three glue sticks, all new. Snippets of Christmas ribbon and two packages of dark brown shoestrings. (I don't own any dark brown lace-ups.)

As far as I could see, these random items had only one thing in common: I didn't *need* any of them, but at some point, I hadn't been able to throw them away.

My heart has a junk drawer too. And I wish *it* would get stuck more often.

I visit it when I'm searching for reasons why God shouldn't love me. When I'm feeling lonely or useless or discouraged. And in it I find odd pieces of my own history that shouldn't matter anymore but still do—some far older than a few candy pieces gone bad. This heart-drawer holds secret sins, confessed—forgiven!—but not yet removed from my memory's outtake reel. Words I wish I'd never spoken. Words I wish I had. Failures. Lapses in ordinary kindness. Moments of misplaced shame. Old hurts I still pick the scabs from. Scars I like too much.

This junk has been forgiven, or redeemed, or transformed—but still I hold on. It's trash. All of it. So the next time this drawer hesitates to open, I mean to let it stay shut. If God has forgotten its contents, then by his mercy I can too.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

Galatians 4:8–9 NIV

If your heart's junk drawer is crammed full too, wouldn't this be a fine day to begin to empty it out completely? Where would you choose to start?



Never Closed, Never without a Customer

The “original” Original Pantry in downtown Los Angeles opened in 1924 and has been open every day since. When the

first location was vacated in 1950 to make room for a freeway off-ramp, the short-order cooks, busboys, waiters, and waitresses finished with the lunch crowd, then moved one block east to serve dinner at the “new” location on the corner of South Figueroa and 9th Street, where the Pantry sits today.

Clark Gable was a regular back in the day, and as the story goes, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Lucille Ball once ate there at the same time, although at different tables.

Eighty-seven customers can be served at once; that’s two thousand plus each day. On the morning I stopped in, the cast included three parrot-headed punkers who had probably not yet been to bed, a well-dressed, middle-aged couple in a silent standoff over their eggs, and a filthy woman at the bar who barked at herself over the din of clanging dishes.

Their coffee cups kept getting filled, just like mine did—and the food kept coming out of the kitchen, one heaping platter at a time. I watched and was reminded that grace is a meal, taken over and over, made possible by a single, once-and-for-all payment. It’s served up in a place that never closes, for an odd collection of



humanity that always changes, with a constant supply of nourishment that never ceases. No star treatment for anyone. The same unblinking, evenhanded service for everyone. The oddest tablemates imaginable. And the smoke coming off the grill filling the dining hall with the smell of sustenance and soot.

Never closed, never without a customer. Isn't that just like the mercy seat of God?

At the cashier's cage near the door of the Pantry, everyone—rich, poor, famous, nameless—pays his tab. The floor before the cage is worn down from the shifting feet of so many diners, exposing layer upon layer of dirty linoleum.

Still, I wouldn't have been surprised if the cashier in the hooded sweatshirt had smiled at me and said, "No charge, honey. Yours is already covered."

Why? Because I'm told that "by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, and on their mind I will write them,' He then says, 'And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more'" (Heb. 10:14–17).

Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering needed for sin.

Alleluia and amen.

*What does it mean to you that God's mercy seat never "closes?"
How will you honor him today for paying your tab forever?*



The Waiting Place

Once recorded a bit of Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go* on my home voice mail. It was a clever bit about "the waiting

place . . . where everyone is just waiting. For a train to go or a bus to come, or plane to go or the mail to come . . . or a phone to ring or the snow to snow . . . just . . . waiting.”¹

I liked the message a lot. But after the first time or two, hardly anyone who called enjoyed sitting through “the waiting place.” Because the truth is, waiting rather quickly loses whatever charm it might have had early on. Even so, I know very few people who are not—at any given time—waiting for something. To receive test results, perhaps. Or to reach the front of the checkout line. To welcome home a loved one. To hear their name called on a try-out list. To be asked to marry, or to dance. To see a stoplight (or a season) change. To hold a baby in their arms.

Like it or not, we all do time in the waiting place. The question is, will we do anything of value *with* that time? Do we simply languish until our circumstances change—or are we willing to linger in discomfort, and learn while we wait?

The Bible is full of wait-ers. Sarai. Elizabeth. Hannah. Moses. David. Hosea. Jonah. Job. What might we have heard if their voices had been recorded? “It’s no use. I’ll never have a child.” Or, “Why shouldn’t I be stuck with someone else’s sheep for the rest of my life? I’m a murderer. I’m no good for anything else.” Or, “Samuel must have been mistaken when he anointed me king. Saul will kill me before he lets me take his throne.”

Some wait-ers *did* wallow in self-doubt and pity . . . for a while. But more often than not, these God-followers learned to linger in their waiting places, seeing all that there was to see. And what there usually was to see was evidence of a great, patient, provident God at work—in the smallest of circumstances and in the hidden places of the human heart.

A wise friend told me once that we are never alone in the cold, dim cave of uncertainty. When our eyes adjust to the half-light, he said, we will see that there are tens, hundreds, thousands, even—waiting with us. And maybe, he said, wait-

ing for a word *from* us that injects hope or humor or sense into what seems to make no sense at all.

Are you waiting? Me too. Here's a meantime word for us both:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power . . . those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength.

Isaiah 40:28–29, 31

What good use could be made of your waiting time? Pray for God's strength to infuse your weariness—and for his power to supply your might. He has not grown tired in your waiting place, and he is the one who is holding you.



Seeing Jesus at Bethlehem

German immigrants built the Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Round Top, Texas, in 1866, and it's still standing. Carl Bauer and his two sons and sons-in-law set much of the native limestone in place, and they are buried in the adjoining cemetery, near the irrefutable proof of their good workmanship. Civil War service markers top both sons' graves.

Once, on a beautiful spring afternoon, a friend and I drove west from Houston to Sealy, New Ulm, Industry, and Round Top, and stopped by Bethlehem Lutheran before ducking into Royer's Café for lunch. The church was empty except for the two of us, and so we wandered up and down the aisles, admiring the old building's quaint simplicity. Ceiling fans hung still