

Parker Palmer is an author and speaker widely known across the country and I heard this story told about him during a worship service I attended in our National Cathedral in Washington DC. Granted, I often embellish my stories but I think I have the basic story line as I heard it told to me.

The holidays were upon him as Parker wrapped up his last speaking engagement and rushed off to the airport. The place was packed, mostly with families and outside the glass walls of the airport terminal the fury of a winter storm was making a dramatic entrance. Exhausted, Parker finally fell back into his window seat and strapped the seat belt securely in place. He let out a prolonged sign of relief as the plane moved slowly back from the gate. The de-icing procedure took forever it seemed but eventually the plane moved on down the runway. Aircraft were backed up everywhere with blinking lights and the plane sat still on the runway for the longest time.

The PA system crackled to life and instinctively a silence fell over the passengers. The tone of the pilot's voice gave it away immediately. "Ladies and gentleman, I have some bad news. In fact," the pilot went on to say, "I have bad news and worse news. The bad news is that just a few minutes ago the weather caused all runways to be closed down for an indefinite period of time. We'll be staying right where we are as other aircraft have already filled every available gate. And here is the worse news. We just discovered that the catering truck that serviced this aircraft made a mistake- all the food and beverage containers placed on board are empty."

After a three second delay, a collective moan swelled throughout the aircraft and loud and belligerent voices shouted out specific directions to unknown controllers in the tower as well as sharing their piece of mind with the distant shadows of bundled up and frozen figures working the tarmac. Soon it seemed that every child on board was either crying or whining in competition with the adult complaints.

Parker sat paralyzed in his seat and stared straight ahead. Why had he accepted this last speaking engagement? Why hadn't he returned home early? What was so essential about logging one more assignment into his schedule? Suddenly it occurred to him he hadn't really had a meal all day and now his stomach was reminding him in no uncertain terms. Even a simple bottle of water sounded exceptionally good right now and he looked sadly at the empty tray table before him.

Stranded, stuck and starved. I imagine that is how Parker Palmer felt as the cold winds blew outside the aircraft. Have you ever been stuck like that? I have flown many times but I don't remember being in quite such a stranded situation.

Charlie, a family friend in Billings, tells an incredible story about the time he and his son got caught in a blizzard while elk hunting in the Crazy Mountains near Big Timber, Montana. The first day was great fun for his son but with the food almost gone by the second day it got serious. They were stranded on a high plateau, stuck in deep

snow and beginning to feel starved.

Susan, not her real name, is stuck in an abusive marriage. She is starved for attention but always ends up on the receiving end of hurts rather than hugs. She did find her way to the Friendship Center here in Helena and received much needed care and very helpful advice. But her husband convinced her things would be different this time and she is back living in the poorly furnished apartment. We pray for Susan.

Marvin, again, not his real name, is just a few years from retirement. He has logged over 20 years with a longstanding Helena business but he was notified in November the parent corporation is pulling the plug. His job is gone just like that. Montana is supposedly sheltered from the worst of our current economic troubles but Marvin emphatically disagrees. His Christmas is bleak. Stranded and stuck are words that resonate loudly in Marvin's vocabulary these days.

Ann Waickman, director of our Helena Food Share, confirms that there are too many people in Helena this Christmas feeling stranded, stuck and starved. It is a reality that she deals with every day. Way more people need help these days. It is a sad commentary on the economic crises that takes a toll on the most vulnerable families.

Stranded, stuck and starved. I wonder how many people are feeling the pinch this Christmas? I wonder how many of us are trying to hold back feelings of fear and apprehension as we put on our best face to Celebrate Christmas?

Careful planning doesn't cut it. Prudent living still leaves us short. The principalities and powers at work in the world suddenly all seem to be working against us. It's near impossible to make ends meet and we feel the pain more deeply at Christmas. Way too many of us are feeling stranded, stuck and starved.

Once again the PA system crackled to life and once again a silence fell over the stranded and disgruntled passengers. Parker and his seatmates strained to listen. It was a man's voice this time but not the one that had introduced himself as the lead attendant. People leaned out in the aisle to see who was speaking in a rather excited, almost animated voice. He apologized once again for the delay beyond anyone's control and then he went on to give instructions.

"Folks, this is what we are going to do. We have hungry kids on board, frustrated parents and angry business travelers all stuck here together. I found several of our large empty serving baskets and my colleagues are passing them out among you. They think I'm crazy but I'm asking you to share. If you have extra food, a soda, crackers, a candy bar or anything you're willing to share- put it in the basket. We'll keep circulating the baskets around and when one of them gets back to you, feel free to take anything you think you might need. Even a stick of gum might help so share what you can and then

help yourselves.”

There was a click as the PA was shut off and the silence hung for a second or two. Then people began to rummage through their bags. They found sandwiches, cookies, chips and an assortment of beverages. The baskets moved between the seats and picked up weight as they traveled. Some folks opened up the overhead compartments and began unwrapping gift boxes of Stover’s fine chocolates and other holiday treats. Eventually, the smell of smoked salmon was as sweet as the laughter and as satisfying as the light hearted conversation that now exploded through the disabled aircraft.

The baskets flowed back and forth between the seats and it seemed that everybody wanted a piece of the action- the action going **into** the baskets, that is!

Those that didn’t have food offered up the best they had. Paper back books, hand puppets, puzzles, magazines and even a rather expensive looking money clip found its way into the basket. Grandparents offered up pictures of grandchildren, the most cherished items they held in their pockets or purses. Others wanted to know the names and ages of the faces in those pictures and so stories were shared and there was more and more laughter as row upon row erupted in celebration.

Michael, the flight attendant that started the whole thing, now began to worry just a little. He started thinking about what he might have to do with all the leftovers as people were still filling the baskets with even more food and gifts.

No one on the plane that night actually remembers how long they spent celebrating together. Eventually the storm eased up and the flight found its way safely to its destination. Parker stretched out his pace when he stepped into the terminal but then stopped short. He turned and returned to the gate and there he found Michael.

After exchanging introductions Parker got to the point. “You know,” he said to Michael, “there is a story in the bible where Jesus finds himself in the middle of a whole crowd of hungry people. He ends up feeding over 5,000 people with just the gifts that a small boy is willing to share.”

“Yes,” responded Michael, “I know the story well. It’s an amazing story isn’t it?”

Parker stood silently as Michael turned and was quickly swallowed up in the crowd making its way through the terminal toward their final destinations. People once stranded and stuck were now celebrating their good fortune.

Stranded, stuck, shortchanged- are these the words that come to mind as you describe your feelings on this Christmas Eve? Have you been focusing too much time on what you can’t afford rather than appreciating what you have? Is it time for you to take a closer look at what’s going into the basket of your life and in your family? Is this the opportunity and the excuse you need to change your attitude and to begin to express your

thanks and appreciation for all that you are already gifted with in your life?

Christmas is the celebration of God's greatest gift coming to each one of us. For God so loved the world that God didn't hold anything back. In one of the most turbulent times in the history of civilization, God confounded the world by sending the gift of God's only begotten Son, Jesus, to be our Lord and our Savior. This is the true gift of Christmas that we must wholeheartedly celebrate tonight.

Choose your words carefully as you return home with your families or as you gather with friends or even as you encounter strangers this Christmas Eve. Express your gratitude for the love and grace and forgiveness and mercy that overflows in abundance into your own life. May you be refreshed and restored as you go on your way rejoicing this night. May a grateful heart be demonstrated in generous actions. May you recognize anew the bounty of blessings that are hidden throughout your own life experiences.

And may the Grace and Peace and the Joy and the Wonder of the Christ Child of Christmas fill you with all good things. May you have a Blessed Christmas and a most Happy New Year.

Pastor Loren Gustafson